Carnivore, Won't You Come Digest Me?

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Carnivore, Won't You Come Digest Me?

by HigherMagic

Summary

Role Reversal AU: Following the execution of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Hannibal is forced to see Doctor Will Graham for a psychiatric evaluation before he can return to the field. Once cleared, Jack insists that Will shadow Hannibal in the hopes of catching the Shrike's copycat. Hannibal has become a master of making sure the FBI stays blind to his extracurricular activities, but Will is a man who sees far too much, and won't be so easily overcome.

Notes

Soooooooooooo another AU. Who's surprised? Not me.
Title taken from Starset's "Carnivore" which is an awesome song for Hannigram, 10/10 would recommend.
Also let me tell you typing "Agent Lecter" and "Doctor Graham" was WILD.
T for now, will become explicit to no one's surprise, but there's a slow burn tag which basically translates to "They will, but I don't know when". Knowing them, it'll probably be somewhere between a Jane Austen novel and a Pizza Delivery Guy porno.
Enjoy!

Chapter 1

Hannibal does not like to think of himself as a particularly impatient man. He can and has sat for hours during a stake-out in his younger days as a city cop, watching the streets for his target with naught but his own thoughts and a static-filled radio station for company. Now, as an agent for the FBI Behavioral Science Unit, his days can and have been spent pouring over case studies, research papers, files, and documentation as he processes reports and hunts serial killers. He can be patient – after all, some of his best hunts have taken him weeks to complete, and the satisfaction of finding and dealing with killers, as well as his own hobbies, have honed his ability to wait and watch to a sharp point.

But he is not particularly patient today. He finds himself sitting, waiting, in the office of a man he has never met. He's a court-ordered psychiatrist, sanctioned by his boss, Jack Crawford, to perform a psychological evaluation before Hannibal is let back into the field. The man sitting across from him is the guardian at the door between freedom and captivity. The cage master, flaunting his iron keys.

The man's name is Will. Doctor Will Graham. He's younger than Hannibal, and monied in the way that means he earned it through his work and wasn't born into it. His office is nice enough, clean and bright and welcoming. The chairs are comfortable and thickly padded. There are couches for people to lie down on and wail their problems to the ceiling.

Will is a static presence, louder than the volume in Hannibal's old cruiser even when he hasn't yet said a word beyond the polite greeting. He sits comfortably but formally, relaxed in his chair, but not slouched. A plain pad of paper sits on one thigh, the leg raised so his ankle rests over his other knee.

He portrays a welcoming, calming presence. His expression is serene, like nothing in the world could bother him.

Hannibal watches him, and Will watches Hannibal. Finally, his expression cracks, and his smile widens. "I understand why you might be hesitant, having to sit here and talk to someone like me," he says, and Hannibal hums, pressing his lips together. He raises his chin in a show of challenge that Will doesn't rise to.

"Hesitant?" he repeats, and shakes his head. "No."

Will tilts his head to one side. He rests one elbow on the arm of his chair and props his head up with his hand. His pen sits along the line of his jaw, which is covered by a thin beard. Hannibal suspects he uses it to make him look older. "Agent Crawford tells me you're one of the top investigators he has," he says, and Hannibal doesn't respond. He won’t let Will see his pride. "Highest closure rate in your entire department, so I've been told."

"Maybe," Hannibal replies, and allows himself a small smile. Will smiles back, showing the edges of his teeth. His voice is low, carefully cultivated to encourage sharing and intimacy. Hannibal doesn't like it, for the fact that he does. "Once you get a feel for the formula of a killer, it becomes routine."

Will's eyes flash. "You seem like the kind of person who enjoys their routines," he says quietly. His eyes drop to Hannibal's hands, which are loosely laced in front of him. Hannibal has his elbows on the armrests of his chair, making himself appear larger, in control.

"I am," Hannibal replies.

Will hums. "Does it bore you?" he asks.

"Why would you say that?" Hannibal says, cocking his head to one side.

Will smiles again, calmly. He doesn't hear the edge in Hannibal's voice, or he willfully ignores it. A dangerous mistake. He doesn't answer.

"I don't find my life boring, if that's what you're implying," Hannibal says.

"Of course not," Will replies, shaking his head. He drops his hand and curls his fingers around his pad of paper. It's blank, for now. "But if everything was normal, you wouldn't have been sent to me."

"Sent to you," Hannibal parrots back. "Do you see me as some wayward child sent by Uncle Jack to be kept in line?"

"Do you think you need to be kept in line?" Will replies smoothly, one eyebrow arching. Hannibal presses his lips together again, sitting back. He draws his elbows in and laces his fingers more tightly together. "I am not here to pass judgement, Agent Lecter. Nor am I here to forgive you of your sins. My role, in this session, is to ascertain if you are fit to return to your job."

"I am as fit as I was last week," Hannibal mutters.

Will hums, his smile growing sharp at the edges. He has a quite lovely smile, Hannibal notices. It makes his eyes crinkle at the corners, and they're a bright blue in the lights of his office. "Last week, your gun had ten more bullets in it," he says. "And a man was out there, killing girls so that he did not kill his daughter."

Hannibal nods.

"How does it make you feel, to know you took a life?"

Hannibal smiles. He has taken many lives before this one. "No different," he replies.

Will raises both eyebrows and lets out a quiet hum. His hand flattens on his notepad and he twirls his pen between his fingers like the coils of a snake. In his hand lies the power to resolve Hannibal of his sins, or to damn him for them. Hannibal wonders if he could forge Will's signature, and do away with him, how long it would take and how many lies he would tell before he got caught.

Too risky. But he indulges the thought of stabbing the pen through Will's neck, of watching him bleed out onto the pristine Persian rug between their chairs.

"I imagine you see a lot of darkness, in your line of work," Will murmurs.

Hannibal smiles. "It is in darkness that our truest selves are shown," he replies. "No one is ashamed of themselves when they think they are moving around unseen."

"Do you think, by stepping into the light, someone will see something that is shameful?"

Hannibal regards him coolly. "I've heard your name before," he says, and Will cocks his head to one side. "You lecture psychoanalytic analysis at the FBI university. Jack has told me of your abilities with something like awe."

Will smiles. "As you said," he replies smoothly; "When one becomes familiar with the mind, subjects become routine. It is easy to pour through the same cases over and over, and achieve the same result."

"Is that not the definition of madness?" Hannibal asks.

"Then we're all mad, aren't we?" Will replies. His smile widens when Hannibal huffs. "You don't like that you're here. I understand – a lot of people view therapy with an ill-colored eye. I am not your enemy here, Agent Lecter."

"Maybe not in your eyes," Hannibal says. His hands drop and he rests one elbow on the armrest again. His fingers find the chain around his neck and he absently pulls out the totem hanging there, rubbing it against his lower lip. "You are the gatekeeper. Through you, my freedom lies."

"Do you feel trapped?" Will asks. "It's natural to lash out when cornered. Garrett Jacob Hobbs held a knife to his daughter's throat, and there was no other recourse. So you put ten bullets in his chest and held your hand to Abigail Hobb's neck while she bled out."

Hannibal hums. He cannot look at Will anymore, and puts his eyes instead to the couch. He wonders how many pathetic, desperate people have laid on that couch, been cured by Will Graham's gentle voice and healing hand. He wonders how many people like him have sat in this chair – too far beyond help, but able to play the part well enough.

Will nods to the pendant around his neck. "You wear that all the time?" he asks.

Hannibal nods. "Saint Michael the Archangel," he replies, and lets it drop to his chest.

"The patron Saint of policemen," Will says with another nod. "Are you religious?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "Semantic," he replies, and sighs. "My sister wanted to be a policewoman when she grew up."

"And what did you want to be?"

"I didn't."

Will frowns, tilting his head to one side. Hannibal smiles. "There was a time, back in my youth, when I didn't want to be anything. I overcame it."

"Do you think you will rise above this, just as you rose above that dark time?" Will asks.

"I'm not suicidal, Doctor Graham," Hannibal says curtly. "I deal with death every day, and while I do not fear it, I am in no rush to meet him in person."

Will is silent, and Hannibal can feel his eyes on his face. He meets Will's gaze without flinching and Will regards him for a long, cool moment. "It's okay to want help, Agent Lecter," he says quietly, after another moment of silence. He shifts his weight, unfolds his legs and crosses the other ankle over his knee instead.

"It's a waste of resources, and yours and my time, to do this," Hannibal says. Will tilts his head to one side. "There are killers to catch, and I'm sure your time would be better put to use on people who actually need or desire your help."

Will smiles, slow and pleased, like Hannibal has made some major breakthrough without his knowledge. "Yes," he replies, happily. "That is true. But until I am satisfied, I'm afraid I must insist. I would ask that you indulge my curiosity."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "You are curious about me?" he asks.

"Jack has told me much about you," Will says. "He speaks of you very highly. So, too, does Doctor Bloom." Hannibal hums in recognition at the name. He has met her many times in Jack's presence. "You possess an ability to catch these killers that is almost paranormal."

Hannibal huffs. "Jack is out of practice," he replies. "He would be able to do it too, if he weren't so weighed down by bureaucracy."

Will hums. "You show a certain distaste for red tape and protocol. Surprising, for a man who claims to like routine so much."

"Routine and restriction are not the same thing, Doctor Graham," Hannibal says.

"Please," Will says, holding up a hand, "call me Will."

"I'd rather not."

"Afraid we might become too friendly with each other?"

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Implying that we might be in each other's company past this evaluation."

Will's smile widens, friendly but sharp like the fox watching the gingerbread man trail closer. Hannibal shifts his weight, unsure how he feels about the light shining in Will's eyes. "I am not afraid of seeing you, Hannibal," he says. "If you are not afraid of stepping into the light."

"Light is garish," Hannibal replies. "Blinding and bright."

"Interesting, then, that you choose to carry the totem of the second brightest of all God's angels."

Hannibal smiles. "Second only to Lucifer, who fell into shadow."

"Is that how you see yourself?" Will asks. "The son of the All-Knowing, cast to the ground, swallowed by the sin and darkness of the world. And within that darkness, you built an empire. How would you react if Michael came to you with his flaming sword and scales of justice, and scuttled you out of your home?" He pauses, and rubs his thumb across the corner of his smiling mouth. "Would you flee like a cockroach? Or attack?"

Hannibal regards him, and tilts his head to one side. "Are you trying to psychoanalyze me, Doctor Graham?"

"You sit on a throne of metaphors and savagery," Will replies coolly. "It would be rude to approach the King without speaking the language of his land."

"So you come to me as a traveler," Hannibal says. "And hope that I might welcome you into my home, and share my fire and food with you."

Will sets his notepad down and spreads his hands out in an open gesture. He straightens up and puts both feet on the floor. There's a tan line of a wedding ring around his finger, dark enough to show that the ring itself has not been there for some time, but not so dark that it is unnoticeable. Hannibal imagines that it can get tiring, to be with someone who sees every little edge and shadow to your words and actions, who simply nods and says 'I understand' and 'How does that make you feel?'.

"Let us be open and honest with each other, Agent Lecter," Will says, and Hannibal raises his chin again. "I have no intention of holding you back from returning to work. I do not think you are irreparably damaged by an act that I believe was perfectly justified, and I do not think it will affect you or cause you any pain."

Hannibal presses his lips together and hums.

Will smiles. "Now, since that's out of the way, perhaps you are more inclined to be a little less reserved towards me."

"You call it reservation," Hannibal says coolly. "Perhaps I simply don't find this practice very interesting."

Will tilts his head to one side, sitting back and sighing – but not in aggravation, or any other negative emotion. "I take pride in my work, Agent Lecter," he says, somewhat sharply. "I would consider it a great personal triumph if you would do the same."

Hannibal hums. "Jack has told me about you, as well," he says, and Will cocks his head to one side. "He says you possess the gift of pure empathy. You can assume any point of view that suits you – mine, or his, or even a killer's if you so desired." Will's eyes flash, he bites his lower lip, and he gives a nod that looks forced. "What do you see, when you look at me?"

Will drums his fingers against the edge of his notepad, one by one, like the countdown drum to the guillotine. "You sit in that chair as a patient," he says, and nods to Hannibal's seat. "It is where countless others have sat, and yet I feel as though our roles here could easily be

reversed. In another life, maybe I was the one who shot and killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. I think it would distress me immensely to do so."

"And it troubles you, that it doesn't distress me?" Hannibal replies.

"I think you are a man of practicality and resource," Will says. "You are judge, jury, and, when necessary, executioner. And you shoulder that responsibility as Atlas shoulders the sky. But even Atlas had reprieve."

"Through deceit," Hannibal says. "Do you think I mean to deceive you?"

Will smiles. "I think you would try, given half the chance," he replies.

"Opportunity and practicality rarely go hand in hand," Hannibal says, smiling. "One requires justification, the other forethought. I could have wounded Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and not killed him. I could have gotten his confession, and prosecuted him for his arrest. That would have been more practical. It would have meant I never had to sit in this chair."

"So, instead, you reacted. You took the opportunity to end him," Will says. "An avenging angel."

"An angel of mercy," Hannibal replies. "Rabid dogs should be put down. He was just a dog."

Will's eyes flash again, and he presses his lips together and lets out a quiet hum. "Well, Agent Lecter, I think that's a good place to end this session," he says, and Hannibal blinks. He had been quite unaware of the time passing by, and finds himself strangely disappointed at Will's abrupt ending. Just when he had started to enjoy the conversation.

Will stands, and Hannibal follows suit. Will walks him to the door, and Hannibal takes his FBI windbreaker and shrugs it on. "I'll tell Jack you are fit and ready to resume your duties at the agency," Will says, and shakes Hannibal's hand with a friendly, warm smile. "Goodbye, Agent Lecter. Thank you for indulging me."

"Goodbye, Doctor Graham," Hannibal replies, and leaves Will's office, feeling oddly displaced, in a way that he hadn't felt upon entering the building.

The next morning, Hannibal leaves his apartment and drives to work. He checks in with Jack and his gun and badge are returned to him, along with a gruff 'Welcome back', which for Jack is as ardent and loving as a surprise party with cake. Still, he appreciates the weight of his gun at his hip and the knowledge that he can go back to his work.

It would be most inconvenient if he were to resume his normal hobbies and be unable to work within the FBI to keep their attention blind to him. Hannibal has made an art out of cultivating and sniffing out other killers to cover his tracks. He's been doing it for years, and thinks it's safe to say he has become a master at it.

Killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs had not been an accident, but Hannibal will admit he got no pleasure out of it. This wasn't a hunt for his own amusement – this had been a real man, a dog trying to pretend it was a wolf, and Hannibal doesn't like using guns. They lack intimacy, and they are far too quick. And bullets shred meat and bone apart to the point where they're unusable.

"Hannibal," Jack says, catching his attention, and Hannibal lifts his head from his desk. Jack gestures for him to approach, and Hannibal stands, locks his computer, and follows Jack to his office.

He stops when he sees none other than Will Graham sitting in one of the chairs opposite Jack's desk. He cocks his head to one side and Will turns to look at him, smiling in a gentle welcome.

"Have a seat," Jack says, in a way that sounds like a suggestion but is definitely an order. Hannibal swallows and takes a seat next to Will. Will sits the same way as he had in his office, relaxed and professional. The wind and chill of the outside means his cheeks are turning pink in the warmth of Jack's office, and his hair is fluffy and curling around his neck from the humidity of the promised storm.

Jack takes his seat as Hannibal settles, and folds his hands on his desk. "I'll get right to the point," he says. "Doctor Graham, I have a bit of a problem."

Will frowns, sitting up a little straighter. Hannibal curls his hands in the pockets of his jacket and resists the urge to slouch like a sullen teenager.

"We caught the Minnesota Shrike, as you well know." Will nods, and Hannibal frowns, wondering why Jack is bringing up that case. He would rather Garrett Jacob Hobbs and the embarrassing legacy of his own rashness fade into memory. "I'd like you to take a look at something."

Jack hands Will a slim file. It's not the one on Garrett Jacob Hobbs – Hannibal knows that file intimately, and it is far thicker. Will takes it and opens it, and Hannibal straightens up, leaning over so he can see the file as Will opens it.

Inside is a series of photographs and an autopsy report, of the girl Hannibal had murdered while in Minnesota, the one he'd mounted on the deer head. It had been a moment of indulgence – he'd wanted to see what it was like inside of Garrett Jacob Hobbs' mind, but had found it to be too dull, too full of emotion, for it to be a true likeness.

Will lets out a soft growl, touching the image of the girl in the photograph with trembling fingertips. Hannibal sits back, surprised at his reaction. "What is this?" Will demands, looking angry when he raises his eyes.

Jack presses his lips together. "It's the last victim of Garrett Jacob Hobbs," Hannibal says. Will looks at him. "Aside from his family."

"No," Will says. He looks back at the photographs and swallows back another tight, angry sound. "This wasn't done by the Shrike."

Jack raises his eyebrows, but his expression is like he's just confirmed what he already suspected. "What's different about it?"

"This is…lacking in honor," Will says. "He wanted her to be found this way. It's the homicidal equivalent of fecal *smearing*. It's…" His upper lip curls, his eyes flashing brightly with something like wrath and disgust. "It's petulant. I almost feel like he's mocking her." He raises his eyes. "Or he's mocking us."

Jack cocks his head to one side.

Will closes the folder and hands it back. "Whoever tucked Elise Nichols into bed didn't paint this picture."

Hannibal hums. "I was unaware you were so familiar with the Shrike case," he says.

Will's eyes move to his, and his lips twitch in a smile. The wrath is gone, buried behind the serene psychiatrist façade. "I like to do my research, Agent Lecter," he replies calmly. "And since you already know – I teach here, meaning every case, once closed, is free to be a study in my lectures. I'm very familiar with the Shrike case."

And me, as well. Hannibal resists the urge to say it.

"If this is a different killer, it means we have a copycat," Jack says tightly, drawing their attention back to him. "Doctor Graham, I'd like your help to catch him."

Will blinks, his eyebrows rising. "I'm not sure I could be much help to you, Agent Crawford," he says slowly. "And I'm sure your team is more than capable of catching this killer. If, indeed, he means to strike again."

"I don't think this is his first murder, Doctor Graham," Jack replies. "And I don't think it will be his last."

Hannibal blinks, and swallows. "Forgive me," he says, "but I'm still at a loss as to my involvement, here."

Jack shakes his head. "I can't send a civilian to crime scenes without training, Hannibal," he says. "I need him to be escorted, should this copycat rise again. You're the best agent I have. I want Doctor Graham to shadow you, in the hopes that when you next happen upon this copycat, you will have his eyes to help you find him."

Hannibal blinks, and frowns. "I don't think that'll be necessary," Hannibal says. "I can catch him myself."

"You didn't notice the difference before," Jack replies coolly, his tone lending no room for argument. Hannibal stifles a growl and sits back again, and this time he knows he is definitely sulking.

Will presses his lips together, drumming his fingers against his thigh. His eyes aren't fixed on anything in particular, but Hannibal senses that Will can feel the tension in the room as easily as he might hear Jack and Hannibal growling at each other.

"I will certainly do anything I can to help the FBI catch a killer," he finally says, and pushes himself to his feet. "I'm sorry, Jack, but I'm afraid I must leave. I have an appointment this afternoon and I wouldn't want to be late."

"Of course," Jack says, and stands. "Hannibal will walk you out. Thank you, Doctor Graham."

Will shakes his hand with a tight smile, and leaves the room. Hannibal follows after a moment, knowing he is being dismissed. "I'm terribly sorry," Will says after a few steps. "I had no idea of Jack's intentions."

"You do not need to justify yourself to me," Hannibal replies. "Nor do you need to justify Jack. I am familiar enough with him to know that, whenever he decides on something, it is a result of much forethought."

Will smiles, thawing from his tense posture. "You do not think Jack is more of an opportunist?" he asks.

Hannibal hums, coming to a stop outside of the doors leading to the outside of the building. Will turns to regard him, his hands in his pockets and pulling the halves of his coat tight around his body in preparation to brave the cold.

"I suppose we will be seeing more of each other, after all," Hannibal says mildly.

Will smiles, biting his lower lip. "It appears so," he replies. "I'll try not to get in the way."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side, eyebrows rising. "This promises to be an interesting venture," he says. "I do hope you have the stomach for it, Doctor Graham."

Will's eyes flash, not righteous, but acknowledging and accepting Hannibal's challenge.

"I suppose that remains to be seen," he replies. Then the challenge is gone and replaced with the small, vacant smile once more. "I'll see you around, Agent Lecter."

Then he turns, and leaves, and Hannibal feels that strange displacement overtake him again. Curious. He returns to his desk and sits down with a heavy sigh, his thoughts a whirl as he tries to focus on his next case: a man creating Angels and sleeping under their watchful eye.

Chapter 2

Hannibal does not have a lot of room in his life or his paycheck for lavish things. What he does spend, though, he spends on his kitchen. His apartment is a ground-floor, basic affair. He doesn't spend a lot of time within it except when he cooks, and the fine things he does own were inherited or brought from his home in Lithuania when he had enough money to send for them.

His kitchen in comparison to the rest of his apartment is positively brimming with expensive tools and equipment – one can hardly make sausage from a man's gut with a twenty-dollar blender, after all. The oven is serviceable, although he often wishes it was larger, so he could do proper roasts. The stove is gas, at least, which took him a long time to find.

He goes home and breads and fries kidneys from the remains of a man who felt like he didn't need to tip at a restaurant. He finds himself sitting and staring at the food, not eating, his mind a whirl.

How in the whole of God's green Earth is he supposed to catch a copycat, with a man who sees far too much watching his every move? Hannibal curses Jack under his breath, and his own foolishness for indulging in his playground while working an active case.

But he would have gotten away with it. The murder was like enough of Garrett Jacob Hobb's other murders, with the motif of a hunter and draining the girls by mounting them on antlers, that no one would have looked twice at it. And as lead on the case, no one would have doubted his deduction when he pinned the murder on Hobbs and closed the case.

Then, Will. Will, with his sharp eyes and his awe-inspiring level of empathy. He'd called it 'petulant', Hannibal's designs. Well, if Will wants to see how *petulant* Hannibal can be, he'll certainly rise to the challenge. It's been a long time since he met anyone who might pose a challenge or threat to him, and Will is both.

He will need to find out more about the man. The devil is in the details now, and information is what will keep Hannibal one step ahead, and make sure he can navigate Will's gaze until Will grows bored, or Hannibal finds another suitable scapegoat for this crime so that Jack is appeased and will take Will off Hannibal's hands.

But first, Hannibal must also find out what Will knows about *him*.

Decided, he finishes his meal and takes his laptop from his office bag, firing it up while he opens a fresh bottle of wine and pours himself a glass. Hannibal will spare a lot of his expenses for good wine, as well – one must hardly go through all the trouble of preparing the meals he does and then pair it with water, or soda. How insulting.

He opens Google and types in "Doctor Will Graham", settling down at his table as the page loads. He gets a link to the BSU faculty, as well as a link to a staff directory of John Hopkins. He raises his eyebrows when he clicks on it. So, apparently Will was a surgeon before he turned to psychiatry and teaching. Interesting.

Hannibal smiles to himself, pleased to note that Will might have the stomach for the kinds of murders Hannibal intends to show him. Or, perhaps it is just the opposite – maybe Doctor Graham couldn't handle the pressure, the blood, the life-or-death of it all.

He finds another link to Will's Alma Mater. "Top three of his class, graduated with honors…" He hums and takes a sip of wine. "You are quite the accomplished man, Doctor Graham."

Still, all this gives him is statistics and a brief summary of Will's achievements. Which, while important, hardly shape a man. He closes his laptop and stands. He will gain much more insight, he is sure, by sharing company with Will. He will pick and prod at the man until Will reveals all of his secrets. Like who he was married to. If he has children. If he cares about them.

The hour is late, and Hannibal knows Will's office will be empty. He finishes his glass and puts the wine bottle in the fridge, decided. It would be interesting to know what Will has said about him in his notes, as well – if Will sees as much as he claims to see.

Will's office lock is easy to compromise, and Hannibal steps into the office and closes the door gently behind him. He uses the light on his phone to find Will's desk lamp and turns it on, not wanting to draw too much attention by turning on the overhead lights. He looks around, taking in all the details he can. Will's office is furnished to provoke a feeling of comfort; everything in it is designed to put a patient's mind at ease, from the intimate placement of the two main chairs, to the thickness and softness of the leather on the couch. There is a ladder leading up to a small balcony that wraps around two sides of the office, where there are books lining the walls.

Hannibal hums, and climbs the ladder. He finds textbooks on psychology, anatomy, as well as several old-looking, leather-bound books. He sees Dante's *Inferno*, the complete works of Shakespeare, and a full set of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica*. There is also, he notes with amusement, an entire shelf dedicated to self-help books, and whether Will uses anything in these for his patients remains to be seen. Hannibal wonders if he lends them out, in the hopes that his patients might find some comfort in them.

Self-improvement is not, after all, a nine-to-five task.

He walks around the shelves and comes to a stop when he sees several notebooks, thickly-packed together. Will's notes, he assumes. He takes the first one down and opens it, shining his phone light on the pages since the light from the desk lamp doesn't reach up here brightly enough to read by.

He frowns.

The pages are covered in handwriting, writing he assumes is Will's, but they do not contain any words he recognizes. Hannibal is fluent in several languages – a fact most find surprising, given his line of work – but he doesn't recognize any of the words from any of the

ones he knows. Or even sister languages of it. The letters are not Cyrillic, nor Latin. They almost look like hieroglyphs - pictographs. But there are numbers here, too.

He raises his head when he hears the door to the building open, and shuts off his phone light, replacing the book. He knows he doesn't have enough time to get down the ladder and turn off the light, so he melts into the shadows with a curse.

It's almost five in the morning – who would possibly be here at this hour?

But, of course, he knows the answer.

Will enters his office, and pauses when he sees his desk lamp on. He frowns, biting his lower lip, and then sighs and shakes his head. "Losing my damn mind," he mutters, and walks over to the desk. He doesn't turn the overhead lights on, mindful of the early hour, Hannibal supposes.

He sits at his desk and takes out a notebook from the top right drawer, his pen in his other hand as he hunches over and starts to write. Hannibal presses his lips together, searching in vain for a way out of the office at this level. Even if Will hears him leave, he is confident he will be able to stay out of sight so that Will doesn't know who, exactly, broke into his office.

He sighs. Stupid thing to do, before he got a feeling for Will's schedule. Will's back is to him, so Hannibal cannot see his face, but Hannibal knows he cannot possibly make his getaway from up here. He will have to wait until Will leaves, and hope he doesn't stay until his first appointment. That would be awkward.

Finally, Will straightens, and turns his head. "If you're waiting for something to happen, you can wait down here," he says. Hannibal blinks, swallowing harshly. He steps forward so that, when Will turns, he is illuminated by the desk light.

Will smiles at him, lacing his fingers over his stomach, and cocks his head to one side. "Hello, Agent Lecter," he says. He doesn't look surprised in the slightest to see Hannibal standing in his office at this Godforsaken hour.

"Hello, Doctor Graham," Hannibal replies. He walks over to the ladder and climbs down it, and Will's smile widens when he comes to a halt at the bottom. Hannibal presses his lips together. "You're an early riser."

"As are you," Will replies with a nod. His smile hasn't faded. "May I ask what you hoped you'd find here?"

"I wanted to know what you said about me," Hannibal says, honestly. Perhaps if he is open and honest, Will won't feel the need to tell Jack about this.

Will raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t look surprised. "Find anything interesting?" he asks.

Hannibal huffs, and shakes his head. "Only that you have a remarkable grasp of the English language," he replies.

"Who says it's English?" Will asks, teasing. He stands and gestures for Hannibal to take a seat in the chair he'd occupied before, and Hannibal goes with another huff. Will follows and takes his own seat as Hannibal does. "For someone who doesn't seem to want or enjoy my company, you show a strange need to know what I think."

"I believe in knowing everything I can about my colleagues," Hannibal replies with a shrug. "If we are to work together, I think it's only fair that I don't challenge your perceptions of me."

"I think you would love to challenge my perception of you, if only to prove me wrong," Will says. His eyes are sharp and assessing on Hannibal's face, his smile ever-present. "If you want to know what I think of you, Agent Lecter, you need only ask."

Hannibal smiles. "Where's the fun in that?" he asks.

Will tilts his head to one side, before he presses his lips together, his smile finally fading. "I'll be frank with you, Agent Lecter," he says. "I have no intention of getting in the way of your investigation – whatever and whoever you happen to be investigating. If you want, we might even become friendly with each other. But I would appreciate it if you maintained the same level of honesty with me. You cannot possibly think it's acceptable to break into my office and snoop through the private notes on my patients."

Hannibal sighs, conceding that. "No," he says. "It was very rude of me. I apologize."

"And I accept your apology, providing that you swear it won't happen again."

Hannibal nods, and Will's smile returns. "Good. Now that that ugliness is out of the way, perhaps there are some questions I can answer myself. Plainly."

Hannibal smiles. "You called the copycat's murder 'petulant'," he says, and Will nods. "I was wondering what made you think that."

Will bites his lower lip. "Garrett Jacob Hobbs destroyed those girls," he says. Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "He used every single part of them. It was an act of worship, and of honor. He loved those girls, as they were surrogates for his own daughter. Now, would you treat that last girl as you would your own flesh and blood? The M.O. was completely different, Agent Lecter. The difference between constructing a mighty sandcastle and then putting a leaf blower into the sandbox."

Hannibal hums, considering that. "Are you suggesting that the copycat merely wanted to play in Garrett Jacob Hobb's sandbox?" he asks.

Will shrugs on shoulder, rubbing his hand over his mouth. Now that Hannibal can see his face, he sees the dark circles under Will's eyes, the slightly pinched shape to his mouth. He wonders if Will has nightmares, if the things he sees and deals with on a regular basis weighs on him more than he lets on. He wonders if Will sits across from monsters en masse, and if any of them follow him home.

"The way we learn art is through mimicry," Will finally says. "Hardly anyone is born with natural talent, especially with the arts. Oh, there are people more predisposed, who have perfect pitch or see in more colors than we do, but the act of practicing and refinement is something we must learn from masters." He pauses, and licks his lower lip, his eyes meeting Hannibal's. "I agree with Jack – I don't think this is the copycat's first murder, nor will it be his last."

Hannibal smiles. "How do you propose we catch him?" he asks.

Will sighs. "What would you suggest?"

"I'd like to hear what you think," Hannibal says.

Will regards him coolly for a long moment, before his lips twitch at the corners. "This copycat felt some connection to Hobbs," he says. "Something intrigued him about these murders. He understood enough not just to know what Hobbs was doing, but what he *wasn't* doing as well. So I would think there would be other serial killers who might catch his eye."

"Oh?"

"The master is gone," Will says, straightening up and spreading his hands out in an open gesture. "If you were a student of the arts, and your teacher retired, or died, what would you do?"

Hannibal smiles. "Find a new master."

"Exactly. Unfortunately that means we can only wait for a new killer to emerge," Will says with a sigh.

"Well, there are no shortage of serial killers in the world," Hannibal says lightly. "I have found and captured many."

Will smiles, slow and knowing. "That you have," he says, and his voice is low and pleased. Like Hannibal is a favorite child who's just learned a new skill. Hannibal shifts his weight and meets Will's eyes, unwilling to be the one to break gazes first.

Then, Will blinks, and he looks away with another quiet sigh. "I've seen a lot of death in my life," he says, gaze far away and voice soft.

"Yes," Hannibal says. "I found out you used to be a surgeon." Will's eyes snap back to him. "Did you find the ailments of the mind more interesting?"

"Not so much more interesting, as less obvious," Will replies. "There are seldom any diseases that present no symptoms. Signs of a broken or disenfranchised psyche are more…obvious."

"Given your remarkable perception, I can't help but wonder if they're simply more obvious to you," Hannibal says. Then, smiling; "And less bloody."

Will's eyes flash. "I get the impression you are testing the resolve of my stomach again," he says mildly.

"Well, since your brain is under such heavy lock and key, I must turn to the physical side of you." He tilts his head to one side when Will hums. "Unless, of course, you would let me take a peek behind the curtain."

Will smiles, but it seems strained. "I'm not some grand wizard of Oz, Agent Lecter," he says. "I have nothing to hide."

"Except your thoughts and impressions of those you meet," Hannibal replies.

Will hums. "For the sake of professionalism," he says. "As you've just proven, apparently anyone can just waltz in and take a look through my notes. It's a good thing I take such measures to keep my patients' secrets private." He pauses. "That means yours, too, you know. Although I don't consider you a patient anymore."

"Ah," Hannibal says, smiling, "so you did take notes on me."

"I have to," Will says. "If, a year from now, or ten years from now, I still know you, but either of us have changed, I will be able to look back and think to myself 'This is the man I first met', and I will be able to take note of the differences."

"Do you think we as humans are so capable of drastic change?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. "You and I are not the same people we were an hour ago. Just as an hour from now, we will not be the same again. Change is the only constant, Agent Lecter."

Hannibal huffs. "You open your mouth and I hear those self-help books come out."

Will hums. "Do you think change can only come from external sources?" he asks.

Hannibal swallows. "I think that is the most influential means of change," he replies. "The traumatic. The chaotic. The grunts and poetry of life. It is through the things that influence us, that we become who we are."

Will is silent for a moment, before his eyes drop to Hannibal's chest, where his sister's pendant sits under his clothes. "The loss of your sister must have been a very traumatic trigger for your change," he murmurs.

Hannibal shifts his weight again and looks away. "Yes," he admits. "I lost my parents around the same time."

Will lets out a quiet, sympathetic sound. "I'm sorry," he replies. "I can only imagine how awful a time that must have been for you. Were you very young?"

Hannibal shrugs and shakes his head. "Old enough to remember. Young enough to overcome it," he replies. His eyes fall to Will's hand, to the tan line of his ring. "What about you?" he asks. "Have you experienced any trauma that you feel changed you at the core?"

Will presses his lips together. He folds one ankle over his other knee. "Yes," he says. "And no. My trauma was not my loss, but that of others."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

"I'd caution you, Agent Lecter. You may want to analyze me, and under normal circumstances I might even encourage you. But if we are going to work together, it is imperative that we do not become too familiar."

"I thought you wanted us to be friendly?" Hannibal asks, unable to stop himself smiling.

Will responds in kind. "Friendships forged by loss, however strong, are destructive," he says. "When I look at you, I do not want to think of the sadness in my life, or the losses, or the failures. Nor do I want you to look at me and think of your sister, or your parents, or your trauma."

"Then why bring it up at all?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. "I suppose I was curious if you would tell me."

"If you think I am withholding things from you, you might tell Jack," Hannibal says. "My evaluation is over, but it is not complete. If Jack thinks I am failing, if you do anything to encourage that notion, then I will be left with nothing."

Will's eyes flash again. His jaw bulges at the corner as he clenches his teeth. Hannibal wonders if Will sees the threat for what it is, however heavily-veiled it may have been. "I think you could overcome anything, Agent Lecter," he murmurs. "Even me. Even Jack."

Especially you. Especially Jack. Hannibal smiles and resists the urge to say so.

He stands. "Let me apologize again for my behavior this morning," he says. Will stands and shakes his hand. "I'll see you later, Doctor Graham."

"Thank you, Agent Lecter," Will says, and walks him to the door. "Drive safely."

Hannibal leaves, and smiles when he hears Will lock the door behind him. He puts his hands in the pocket of his coat and hums to himself as he goes back to his car, which he parked around the corner of the building so as not to arouse suspicion. Clearly he didn't do a very good job of it.

Or perhaps there is some hunter instinct in Will as well, that knows when the snake slithers by. His smile widens and he gets into his car, ready to drive back to his apartment. He is sure Jack will have words for him in the morning, whether or not Will tells Jack what happened.

He finds himself strangely excited to see how this all plays out. If Will has the ability to survive Hannibal, or if he will be consumed in his entirety by the end of the whole bloody orchestra.

Chapter 3

Hannibal finds Will within the halls of the University. A quick search had given him a list of the classes Will teaches, as well as their schedule and assigned rooms, so he has no trouble navigating the halls until he hears the other man's voice, soft but carrying from his lecture hall.

He comes to a halt at the open lecture hall doors. Will is immediately visible down the small, wide aisle, and Hannibal sees a few extended legs of his students from where he's standing. The lecture hall is a small and intimate space, the rows of seats forming a balcony and climbing still higher above Hannibal's head.

Behind Will is a desk, and a projector showing the image of a woman, dead and cold and white, her head tilted to one side, her hair splayed out almost artfully. There's a huge pool of blood at her neck, contrasting darkly with the orange color of the hardwood floor.

Will speaks again, and Hannibal's eyes lower from the image to the man himself. Will stands loosely, at ease but proper, his hands in the pockets of his slacks. He's wearing a sweater vest and collared shirt, and looks like every high school professor any girl or boy has ever had a crush on. His eyes are bright behind his glasses.

"Everyone has thought about killing someone, in one way or another," he says, his eyes scanning the row of students above Hannibal's head. Hannibal prowls closer, knowing Will knows he's there, but Will won't interrupt his lecture and Hannibal can be patient. "Be it your own hands or the hand of God." Will pauses, and his eyes meet Hannibal's. A smile comes across his face, serene and quick, and then he turns away and looks up at the screen. "Now think about killing Missus Marlow."

He turns back around, his eyes looking over the rows of students. Close as he is, and at this angle, Hannibal can see that the lecture hall is thoroughly packed. More than just BSU hopefuls, he suspects.

Will smiles. "Why did she deserve this? Tell me your design," he murmurs. He circles his desk and shuts off the projector with a remote. "Tell me who you are."

His eyes fall to Hannibal, and his smile widens when he gives a nod of greeting. He opens his briefcase as his students stand and file out, and Hannibal steps out of the hallway so as not to stymy their exit, and comes to a halt at the corner of Will's desk.

"You command the room when you teach," Hannibal says in greeting.

Will huffs, smiling. "The sad, dull truth of these crimes is they can usually be reduced to a male penetrative control issue," he replies, and then raises his voice; "I am expecting a higher level of scrutiny." It's a playful warning to his students.

Hannibal hums as the last of them file out, his eyes raised to the dull grey of the projection screen. "I remember reviewing this case," he says mildly. Will nods, pressing his lips together

as he finishes placing his notes and files inside and closes it.

"How can I help you, Agent Lecter?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. "I was hoping to take you to lunch, to atone for my rudeness this week." Will's eyes flash, remembering how Hannibal had broken into his office to try and sneak a peek at his notes. "And," Hannibal holds up a file, "to borrow your imagination."

Will nods to it. "Is that the copycat?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal replies, lowering the file. "I thought if you had some more time, between the two of us, we could uncover more of anything I missed."

Will regards him for a moment, not guarded, but assessing, before he smiles and nods. He lowers his eyes. "I could eat," he replies.

"Excellent," Hannibal says, smiling. He waits for Will to gather his coat and then walks with him out of the lecture hall. "I regret not catching more of your class. It seemed interesting."

Will huffs a laugh. "I don't imagine you would learn much from it," he replies.

"The belief that I know all there is I could know is arrogant," Hannibal says. "I try to distance myself from it at all costs."

Will hums. "A mindset too few people share," he says warmly. Hannibal leads the way to the University dining hall. Normally he would have invited Will to his home for a cooked meal, or brought enough for them both to eat, but he had been pressed for time this morning and senses that had he extended the offer, Will might have refused him.

He gets a salad, mourning the look of the wilted lettuce, and blinks in surprise when Will seems to load his tray up with mostly junk food. He takes a serving of fries, a slice of the chocolate cake – that Hannibal will admit was quite good the one time he tried it – and a pre-packaged turkey sandwich that looks like it's made more of white bread and cheese than actual meat.

"Do you often treat your stomach so indelicately?" Hannibal asks as they take their seats at a table, a little way removed from the rest of those sitting down to lunch.

Will huffs. "It's simple input and output," he says. "I have a high metabolism."

Hannibal hums.

"Again, you mention my stomach," Will notes. He opens his sandwich and takes a bite, sitting forward in his chair with his elbows on the table as he takes a large bite from the corner. "Freud would have a lot to say about that."

Hannibal smiles. "Do you subscribe to his theories?" he asks.

"He is the father of my discipline," Will replies with a cavalier shrug. "Some of his theories are still good. And in a hundred years, they might all be debunked. The brain evolves, just as

killers do."

"I am very careful about what I put into my body," Hannibal says, taking a bite of his salad. It's a plain meal and Hannibal resolves that he will go hunting later that day, to replenish his stores. He eats vegetarian whenever he goes out and it feels like an insult. "Like you said, it's input and output, but there are other things to consider aside from caloric count."

Will raises an eyebrow and takes another large bite of his sandwich, like he's taunting Hannibal with his terrible food choices. Will's eyes go to the window, where the sky is bright and clear of storm clouds, melting the ice gathered around the edges of the walkways.

"They say a way to a man's heart is through his stomach," he murmurs after a quiet, contemplative moment.

Hannibal smiles. "It is the first time we fall in love," he replies. "When our mothers nurse us, and then when our parents feed us."

Will hums, and sets his sandwich down. "Shall we take a look at that file?"

Hannibal hands it to him, and Will opens it at the side of his plate, picking absently at his cake with his fork while Hannibal continues to eat. Will's mouth gets tight at the corners as his fingers touch the image of the girl mounted on the stag head.

Hannibal lets him stew, content to eat while Will's sharp eyes take in the crime scene once again. Will takes a bite of cake and makes a soft, aggravated sound. "This crime scene bothers you," Hannibal notes.

Will nods. "It's practically gift-wrapped," he murmurs. He raises his eyes to Hannibal's briefly, then drops them again like he can't look away. Or he can't maintain eye contact. "I don't understand. This is everything Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn't do. He'd be outraged if he could see it."

"Outraged," Hannibal repeats. "You are outraged."

Will presses his lips together, his jaw clenching. He sets his fork down and takes another bite of his sandwich, before he rubs his hand over his mouth. "This scene is a mockery of what Hobbs tried to do," he says, and Hannibal hums. "It bothers me because there's no reason to do it. Unless the killer knew Hobbs." He looks at Hannibal again. "Or you."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

"He knew you were hunting Hobbs. He knew enough about Hobbs' M.O. to do the exact opposite. All the components, all the pieces were there. He must have had intimate knowledge of Hobbs' murders."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Do you think he knew Hobbs?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "It's not intimate enough for that," he murmurs, looking down at the photograph again. "He slaughtered this girl. She meant nothing to him. She was a…a pig."

His voice goes soft, and his eyes widen with something like realization. He takes the photograph from its paperclip and sets it to one side, scanning through the autopsy report placed below. Hannibal watches him do it, burning with curiosity to know what Will is thinking.

Will sits back, letting out a shaky exhale. "He took her kidney," he says.

Hannibal nods. She had made a fine meal.

Will stands, abruptly. "I need to see Jack," he says. "Immediately."

"What is it?" Hannibal asks. He takes the photograph and slides it back into the folder, closing it as Will gathers up his tray and heads towards one of the trash cans. Hannibal follows, not even a little sad to see the salad go along with Will's terrible choice of food.

Will doesn't answer immediately. He strides out of the cafeteria and comes to a halt just shy of the main doors. He looks flustered and shaken and Hannibal has no idea why.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and reaches for him. Will flinches, and Hannibal is surprised at his reaction. He drops his hand.

"I'm sorry," Will says, rubbing his hands over his face. "I have to go. Thank you for lunch."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side but doesn't chase Will as he practically flees down the hallway, passing around the small groups of people standing and talking without a second glance. Hannibal hums, wondering if he should follow.

He decides against it. If it has anything to do with him, he's sure Jack will inform him soon enough.

This does free up most of his afternoon, now. He smiles to himself and hums a tune as he walks towards his car. No time like the present to stock his pantry.

Hannibal doesn't hear from Will or Jack for the rest of the day, which is good, because his latest victim had been a loud one – constantly groaning and wailing until Hannibal had finally snapped his neck. He needs to start saving for a bigger place, one with a soundproof room or basement where he can indulge in his desire to keep his meat fresh for longer. Vacuum-sealing meat has his merits, of course, but there's nothing quite like bleeding someone dry or eating pieces of them while their heart is still beating.

He imagines how each part of Will would taste, how his meat would gradually get bitter with pain and fear. The look in his expressive, pretty eyes whenever Hannibal might come back for another piece of him. He'd leave Will's brain until last, so that he could remain alive while Hannibal enjoyed him, but also because the brain is the most remarkable thing about Will, and he would want to save his favorite piece until last.

Jack calls him into his office the next day, and when Hannibal gets there, he sees that Will is not in the office with them. He had expected him to be, and swallows back the feeling he doesn't want to identify as disappointment as he takes a seat on the opposite side of Jack.

"Agent Lecter," Jack greets gruffly. He has a file in front of him, significantly thicker than the one for the copycat, and definitely not the one for Garrett Jacob Hobbs. "How are you feeling?"

Hannibal smiles. "Fit as a fiddle," he replies, and Jack hums. "How can I help you?"

"Will spoke to me yesterday," he says, and looks at Hannibal as though waiting for him to agree. Hannibal nods, humming in acknowledgement. His relationship with Will is no secret, in whatever capacity he would call their friendship or working relationship. Jack presses his lips together. "What do you know of the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "We haven't heard from him in a number of years," he replies slowly. "Since Miriam."

He remembers her, years ago, the bright and wide-eyed protégée of Jack's with too many guts and not enough sense to save her. She'd been a remarkable young woman. Hannibal remembers her fondly.

Jack's eyes flash, age-old wounds rising to the surface. Hannibal fights back his smile. "Yes," he replies, and clears his throat. He tosses Hannibal the file. "Will claims he has resurfaced."

Hannibal's eyebrows rise, and at that moment, Jack's door opens and Will steps into the room. "Sorry I'm late, Agent Crawford…Agent Lecter," he adds, spying Hannibal. Hannibal gives him a nod of greeting and Will takes his seat. Hannibal takes a moment to realize the warm feeling in his stomach is something like relief upon seeing Will, and hearing his voice. "I was kept back."

"It's no trouble," Jack replies. "I was just telling Hannibal your theory."

Hannibal opens the file, noting that the photo of his Shrike-like murder has been added. "You believe this copycat was the Chesapeake Ripper?" he asks.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "He did his first victims in nine days," he says. Hannibal flicks through the photos almost like they are slides in Will's projector. "Annapolis." Another photo. "Essex. And Baltimore. He didn’t kill again for eighteen months."

Hannibal nods.

"Then there was another sounder of three in as many days. All in Baltimore."

"Sounder?" Jack repeats, frowning.

Will nods again. "A sounder is a small group of pigs. That's how he sees his victims – not as people, but as prey." He pauses. "Just like this latest victim; the girl on the stag's head. She was a pig to him."

Recognition flickers in Hannibal's brain. He swallows and turns another photograph over. These are all familiar sights to him, but seeing them in such harsh light, after so long, is jarring. He imagines this is what it feels like to someone who has lost their memory and sees something that triggers their return.

Will continues in his silence; "Eleven months after the sixth victim there was a seventh. Two days later, the eighth was killed in his workshop. Every tool on the pegboard where they hung was used against him. As with the previous murders, organs were removed."

"You are remarkably familiar with these cases," Hannibal notes mildly, closing the folder and looking at Will.

Will shakes his head and manages a tight smile. He appears distressed, flustered. "Like I said before, every closed case is something I am allowed to study and lecture on."

"Ah," Hannibal says, smiling, "but this case is not closed."

Will regards him, his eyes dark, and then he looks back at Jack. "The removal of organs and abdominal mutilations means that the Ripper is someone with anatomical or surgical knowhow. There is a distinctive brutality."

Hannibal smiles.

"An FBI trainee named Miriam Lass was investigating private medical records of all the known victims when she disappeared. She is believed to be the Ripper’s ninth."

Jack's eyes flash and he lets out a low sound, almost like a warning. "What makes you think this is the Ripper, again?" he asks. "It's been years."

Will smiles. "The theatrics," he replies, waving his hand like he's gesturing to a grand art display. "And the fact that he took her kidney. The Ripper has always shown a certain flair for the dramatic. And taking pieces of his pigs is standard procedure."

There's silence after his declaration, and Hannibal sets the folder down. "This is a grave theory, Doctor Graham," he says mildly. "And Ohio is widely outside of the Ripper's comfortable hunting grounds."

"I don't think he ever left," Will replies. "I just think he laid low. Denied himself his artistry. But we can't deny our urges forever, Agent Lecter. Eventually they will get the better of us."

"You are the first person to look at this as anything other that what it is," Hannibal replies, somewhat curtly. "There is no reason aside from your theories that this copycat is even a copycat. It could have been Hobbs. And tying this murder to a long-gone legend is… outlandish."

Will's eyes flash. "I know what I see."

Hannibal smiles, unable to resist teasing Will further, picking at his ruffled feathers; "That sounds very arrogant, Doctor Graham," he says. Will's jaw clenches. "Forgive me, but your

experience as far as I know it is wholly theoretical. We cannot possibly say for any certainty if this is the Ripper or not."

"You speak very defensively about him," Will says. "Is there something you're not telling me, Agent Lecter?"

Hannibal's smile widens and he darts his eyes to Jack in an obvious gesture he knows Will sees. "Perhaps I simply don't like the idea of opening old wounds," he says mildly. Will follows his gaze, and when he sees how pale and drawn Jack looks, he deflates visibly.

He swallows. "I'm sorry," Will says, and Hannibal is almost disappointed at how easily it was to convince Will he was wrong. Then; "But I really think this is the Ripper, Jack. It fits too perfectly to be anything else."

…Or perhaps not so easy. Hannibal finds himself at once delighted and troubled.

Jack looks between them and folds his hands together. "If there's even the slightest chance that the Ripper has resurfaced, I want to know," he says darkly. He looks at Hannibal. "Do you think it's a possibility, Hannibal?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, and curses his own indulgences, not for the first time. He should have never played in Hobbs' sandbox, and should have never tried to tease the vision of the man who sees far too much.

"Perhaps," he finally concedes. Jack sighs heavily and rubs a hand over his face.

"If he's killed once, it's the beginning of a new sounder," Will says. "He will kill again. We'll find him, Jack."

"I know," Jack replies darkly. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Chapter 4

Hannibal gets a call from Jack summoning him to another murder, with orders to bring Will. Hannibal confirms the address to be the Baltimore Opera House, and hangs up the phone, immediately calling Will's office number.

"This is Doctor Graham," Will greets, picking up on the third ring.

"Good morning, Doctor Graham," Hannibal says brightly, sliding into his car and starting it. The car does a stand-up job of trying to get warm for him, but he still shivers as he waits for his car to warm up before he starts driving. "I just received a call from Jack. We've been summoned to another crime scene."

Will hums. "The Opera House?" he asks.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Word travels quickly to you," he murmurs, pulling out of his apartment complex parking lot and heading to Will's office.

Will lets out a low, aggravated sound. "It's already all over *TattleCrime*," he states. "Along with some rather disparaging remarks about your handling of the copycat case."

Hannibal smiles weakly. "Yes. I'm familiar with Miss Lounds."

"Am I to meet you there?"

"You can," Hannibal replies. "Or I can come get you."

Will pauses, apparently giving the offer some thought. "Alright," he finally says. "I'll see you soon."

Hannibal nods and hangs up, pulling out onto the highway and driving towards Will's office, which is located on the other side of Baltimore, north of Annapolis. It isn't a long drive as the crow flies, and in the mid-morning the traffic is kind to him. He reaches Will's office within half an hour and waits outside.

Will comes out, like he was looking through the window for Hannibal's car. He's wrapped in a thick coat, gloves, and a scarf that covers the lower half of his face. He gets into Hannibal's car at the passenger seat, shivering at the sudden change of temperature, and unwraps his scarf.

"Thanks," Will murmurs when Hannibal reaches across to turn one of the air vents towards him. Will's cheeks are already turning pink and he has dark circles under his eyes, speaking to another sleepless night.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, not driving just yet, as he waits for Will to warm up. "Do you have trouble sleeping, Will?"

Will huffs, mouth twitching at the corner. "Nothing slips by you, does it?"

Hannibal hums, shifting the car into reverse and pulling out of the parking lot onto the main road. He doesn't answer.

Will sighs, rubbing a hand over his jaw, and scratches below his chin. "Did Agent Crawford share any details with you?" he asks. "About this murder?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies with a tight smile. "But since he asked for you, I can only assume he believes this is another piece of work from the Ripper."

Will hums. "You disagree."

"The Ripper kills in threes, as you well know," Hannibal replies mildly. "Perhaps his urges are overwhelming him."

"I can't decide if you have faith in my abilities or not. Your attitude towards me changes like the wind."

"Perhaps I am simply trying not to make a monster out of a shadow," Hannibal says coolly. Will hums, and after a short pause, Hannibal adds; "Your knowledge of the Ripper cases borders on obsession."

Will smiles, and Hannibal can feel Will's sharp eyes on the side of his face. "Oh, I wouldn't call it obsession," he replies mildly. "I find myself curious. When I think about him, I can imagine him sitting your chair, telling me about himself." He looks away, and his smile grows soft and affectionate. "The way he thinks, the stories he would tell. I document these conversations as I would any one I have with my patient."

"Oh, so you're schizophrenic, then," Hannibal says with a playful smile.

Will laughs. "Of course not, Agent Lecter. It's only imagination. It seems to suit Jack just fine."

"Still, I feel I must warn you – whether or not our copycat is the Ripper -."

"Which he is."

"Regardless, pursuing him proves to be a dangerous venture. The man is a cold-blooded killer, Doctor Graham."

Will hums, and Hannibal feels Will's sharp eyes on his face again. "I have the utmost faith in your ability to defend me, Agent Lecter."

The way he says that almost sounds…flirtatious. But Hannibal cannot accept that as the case. He's reading too much into it. "I am just one man," he says quietly. "So are you."

"And so is he."

"Why does he interest you so much?"

"I just find his personality disorder…so delightfully unique. He doesn't really care to boast; the timelines and hunting grounds consistently change and with a few notable exceptions, he keeps a low profile. It is everything I have been taught not to look for when it comes to identifying the pathologically murderous." Will sighs, slouching a little in Hannibal's seat. "In everything but the act itself, he is careful and methodical and yet this girl, this teenager he mounted on the stag head – it was emotional. Something about the case touched something in him."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. He wants to look at Will, but the traffic has grown thick and he must keep his eyes on the road as a matter of safety. "And how do you think he'll react, knowing the FBI is going to try and pin that murder on him as well?"

"Oh, I imagine he'll be quite pleased that the mice are getting smart."

Hannibal smiles. "You consider yourself a mouse?"

"Do you?"

"You must promise me not to do anything rash," Hannibal adds mildly. He reminds Hannibal of Hannibal's old street partner – he was the kind of man who rushed in with his head lowered, guns blazing, like a charging bull. "If you insist on pursuing the Ripper angle, you must tell me anything and everything you know."

Will hums. "How different our lives might have been had you been sitting in my chair, and mine in yours, the first time we met."

"Position placement doesn't change the relationship, Doctor Graham."

"Maybe I'll let you sit there, next time. I know how cops don't like to keep their backs to the door."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "Do you believe there will be a next time?" he asks. "Do you think I might empty another magazine into a man's chest?"

Will huffs a laugh. "I suppose that would depend on the situation," he replies mildly. "But I am certain of one thing, Agent Lecter."

Hannibal makes a soft, questioning sound.

"Guns lack intimacy. I think the next time you kill someone, it will be with your bare hands."

He says it with such surety, and absolutely no distress. Like he's eager to see the next crack in Hannibal's façade. Hannibal doesn't have time to reply, as he rounds the corner and sees the flashing lights and dark SUVs of the FBI investigative team, gathered around the entrance to the Baltimore Opera House.

Will sighs when Hannibal stops and parks his car. "Duty calls."

Hannibal knows he will not be assigned as a lead on this case, which is why it surprises him when Jack greets both of them at the door and leads them right to the crime scene. Will gasps, his eyes widening at the sight. Hannibal presses his lips together and takes in the scene.

A man sits in a single chair, shrouded in bright light. His arms are slack, his suit stained with blood, his head tilted back, one hand cradling a musician's bow. His throat has been sliced open and exposed and the neck of a cello sticks out of his mouth. The instrument piece is positively gleaming, clean and bright in the harsh light.

"Doctor Graham," Jack greets, guiding Will towards the front of the room. Hannibal follows. "He was found by the house manager this morning. Time of death puts him here around ten at night last night. No cameras, no witnesses."

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "What do you make of it?" Jack asks.

Will's eyes dart around, to Hannibal first, then the myriad of photographers and analysts crowding the scene. "May I go up there?" he asks. "Alone?"

Jack nods. "Clear the stage!" he calls, and Will ducks his head, takes a pair of surgical gloves from Beverly as she walks towards them, and ascends the stairs, tugging the gloves onto his hands. Hannibal wants to follow him, to see what he might see, but he forces himself to remain back.

"Who's the new meat?" Beverly asks, folding her arms across her chest and looking at Hannibal with a raised eyebrow.

Hannibal smiles. "Doctor Graham is a study of serial killers," he replies mildly. "Jack has called him in to gain his expertise."

Beverly hums, nodding once. "Do you always escort Jack's consults?" she asks sharply. Hannibal cannot tell if she's mad at being interrupted or not. Beverly is possibly one of the only people who Hannibal thinks places efficiency above his own desire for order and routine.

Hannibal smiles at her, then puts his eyes on Will's back as he comes to a stop in front of the dead man. From where he's standing, he cannot see Will's face, but he wants to. Desperately.

"No sign of forced entry?" he asks Jack.

Jack shakes his head. "This is a public building," he says. "I asked the house manager, says the man is a trombone player for the orchestra. He performed here last night, and that's the last anyone saw of him until this morning."

"The article about this murder is already on *TattleCrime*," Hannibal notes. "Has Miss Lounds been skulking around?"

"We kicked her out about two hours ago," Jack says darkly. He shakes his head. "If she wasn't such a colossal pain in my ass, I'd admire her tenacity."

Hannibal smiles.

Will sucks in a harsh breath, drawing his attention. "Be quiet, please," he says, lifting one gloved hand. He steps forward and takes the bow from the trombone player's lax hand. He reaches forward and cups the man's jaw, tilts his head farther back to the sound of creaking strings.

He turns around and regards Jack. "This murder was a performance," he says.

Jack raises an eyebrow. "A performance?" he repeats. "For who?"

Will shakes his head, stepping to one side. He puts one hand around the neck of the cello and draws the bow across the man's throat. It makes a sound, soft and low like he's playing a real instrument. "This takes a steady hand," he murmurs, dropping the bow to his side. "A confidence. Whoever killed this man has killed before, but not like this."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side and Will meets his eyes.

"This is a skilled musician, trying a new instrument. I think he wants to show someone how well he plays."

Beverly hums, raising her eyebrows. "Your friend certainly has a creepy way of saying things," she says as an aside to Hannibal.

Hannibal smiles.

Will ducks his head, twanging the man's vocal cords lightly. His fingers curl around the man's neck with something like intimacy, like the man is his lover in the throes of pleasure. "You can't just open someone up and play them like this. The strings have to be treated." He frowns. "Who provides strings for the Opera?"

"I can get that information," Jack says.

Will nods. "I'd start there," he says.

"You don't think it's the Ripper," Jack says, sounding dismayed.

Will sets the bow down on the floor and walks back towards them, taking off his gloves as he does so. The analysts and Beverly go back onto the stage to continue to their work. "Was anything else taken from the man?" he asks.

Jack shakes his head. "Nothing reported so far," he replies.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. He takes Jack's arm and speaks to him with a lowered voice; "I know you want to catch the Ripper, Jack," he murmurs. "I want to find him too."

'Find', not 'catch'. Interesting choice of words.

"But I'd encourage you to try not to see his touch in everything that happens," Will continues. Hannibal fights the urge to smile when Jack lets out a soft, aggravated growl. "There are no

shortage of evil or disturbed people in the world. Unfortunately, the Ripper doesn't own a monopoly on murder."

Jack sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. "I'll get the name of the string provider," he says. "I want you and Hannibal to interview him."

Will smiles, and nods. "Of course," he says.

Jack leaves, and Hannibal and Will remain where they are. Will sighs and shakes his head, joining Hannibal in watching the forensic examiners dissect and photograph the crime scene.

"I appreciate you trying to assuage Jack's fears," Hannibal says mildly. "Although I think the damage has already been done."

Will hums. "I must learn to be careful with what I say," he replies.

"Tell me, Doctor Graham, what notes would you make of this murderer, if he were sitting in your patients' chair?"

Will looks at him, and Hannibal turns so they can regard each other fully. Will bites his lower lip, sliding his hands into the pockets of his coat. "This is…haughty," he says. His eyes flash to the corpse. "Arrogant. A response to an offense."

Hannibal hums, and watches as something dark and angry touches Will's face. "Had to open you up to get a decent sound outta you," he growls, and it's not Will's voice. It's darker, violent, and his eyes are shining in the light coming off the stage.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side, and Will's eyes flash. He clears his throat, flushing, and ducks his head. "I feel the man's offense like it's my own. His music hurts my head. It's… sharp, off-key. And then I hear strings, and they're beautiful." He clears his throat again, his shoulders rolling like he's trying to physically shake off the killer's mindset.

He turns and walks back towards the main doors. Hannibal follows. "Are you a fan of classical music, Agent Lecter?"

"An avid one," Hannibal replies. "Vinyl and recordings do not do it justice. Had I more income, I would frequent this place as often as I could."

"You were born with the soul of a man who needs the finer things in life," Will replies with a sigh. "I think I was born with the soul of a man who just needs a quiet stream. My father used to take me fishing when I was younger, when he had the time. Those weekends were the most peaceful times of my life."

"For me, it was in the kitchen," Hannibal says. "It still is."

Will smiles warmly at him, coming to a stop in the shadowy enclave just before the door. If Jack still wants to make use of them, Hannibal knows they cannot leave just yet. The case is still open, after all.

"Excuse me."

Hannibal turns to see a familiar mane of fiery ginger curls prowling their way. Freddie Lounds is a woman with sharp features and sharper eyes. She has a notebook and recording device in her hands. "Good morning, gentlemen," she says primly. Will tilts his head to one side, looking her up and down. "I don't suppose you'd give me a moment of your time?"

"Miss Lounds, I'm afraid I cannot divulge information of an active case to you," Hannibal says coolly. "And I believe you should not be here."

"Oh, so *you're* Freddie Lounds," Will says, offering her one of his serene psychiatrist smiles. Hannibal wonders what he sees when he looks at her. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine," she replies, shaking Will's hand. "Mister…?"

"Doctor Graham," Will says, putting his hands back in his pockets after their handshake.

"'Doctor' as in medical license, or 'Doctor' as in fancy degree?"

"Both," Will replies with a cordial smile. He doesn't say anything else.

Freddie raises an eyebrow. "And might I ask, *Doctor* Graham, what your involvement is in this case?"

"Oh, I merely wandered in off the street. Apparently, anyone can do that, these days."

Freddie's eyes flash and Hannibal cannot help the amused huff he lets out, delighted by Will's sharp tongue and salted wit. "Doctor Graham," she murmurs, blinking in thought. "I've heard your name somewhere before."

"Perhaps," Will replies with a shrug. "I teach at a University. I'm published some modest research."

Freddie hums. She offers them both a large, shark-like smile. "Well, I appreciate your time, Doctor Graham. Agent Lecter." She nods to them both. "I'm sure we'll meet again."

Will smiles at her, and she leaves to try and ensnare some other hapless provider of information. Hannibal smiles at Will. "I must commend you for your tactfulness," he says.

Will raises an eyebrow.

"A lot of outside consults have the unfortunate penchant for gossip. Most people like having their name in the news."

"I'm not most people," Will replies coolly. "And like you said, this is an open case. We wouldn't want to run the risk of information getting out. Fame, I've found, has been an encouragement to most killers."

"Oh?"

"People like having their name in the news," Will says, repeating Hannibal's words back to him with another smile. "I can picture it now; 'Baltimore rocked at Cello Man murder'. And a

strange new consult helping the FBI for no apparent reason. If Miss Lounds is as persistent as most in her field are, I would be careful not to air out my dirty laundry."

"You sound like you speak from experience," Hannibal notes.

"Not my own, thankfully," Will replies. Then, he sighs and scratches at his neck. "I'm starving."

"I'm sure Jack can text us the details when he has an address and a name."

Will nods, and smiles softly. "We never did get to finish that lunch," he says. Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "That was my fault, and I behaved rather rudely. I feel compelled to extend another offer, to make it up to you."

"Implying that I find value in your company," Hannibal replies, although he's not sure why. Perhaps he simply likes the way Will smiles whenever Hannibal says something argumentative. It makes his eyes shine, and Hannibal likes when Will smiles wide enough to show his teeth.

"There's a wonderful Ethiopian place not far from here," Will says.

Hannibal smiles. "Sounds delightful."

Chapter 5

"Apparently our string provider is one Tobias Budge. He owns a music shop in Baltimore," Hannibal says, reading off the text from Jack as they settle down at the Ethiopian restaurant.

Will hums, sipping his glass of ice water. "Seems kind of obvious," he replies. Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "I wonder if Mister Budge's shop specializes in stringed instruments."

Hannibal smiles, setting his phone down and picking up the menu. The scents of the restaurant are sharp and pleasant, and he contemplates eating something other than salad when out for the first time in a while.

"Killing a trombone player, it would make more sense if he used the victim's instrument of choice for his performance," Will continues, "but the killer didn't use a trombone. He used a cello. Something he was familiar with."

"You seem to already think that Budge will be our killer," Hannibal notes.

Will smiles. "Sometimes it's just not a mystery, Agent Lecter," he replies. "I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"I shall have to indulge my curiosities some other way," Hannibal says with feigned heaviness. He likes the way Will's smile widens, fond and soft. "So, we have a suspect, we have means. What of motive?"

"Like I said," Will replies, sitting back in his seat. "Arrogance. Offense. If our dead man wasn't a particularly adept player, or if he didn't perform at a certain standard, our killer might have felt the need to do away with him." He sighs, looking away, towards the back room where the kitchens are. "Or…"

Hannibal cocks his head to one side.

Will sighs again and shakes his head. "Never mind."

"Please, Will," Hannibal says, setting his menu down and sitting forward. "Tell me your theory."

"it's tenuous," Will murmurs. "It relies on a lot of…leaps."

"Leaps," Hannibal repeats. "The kind of leaps that would hold up in court?"

Will huffs, putting his eyes on Hannibal again. He shakes his head. "No," he replies. "But I'll have a better idea after we interview Budge."

"I feel like you're taunting me, here," Hannibal says. "Do you want me to beg?"

Will smiles, his cheeks turning pink, and takes another drink. The waiter comes by to take their order and Hannibal orders *gored gored* – a raw beef dish that he will be able to smell for

any imperfections – and Will orders *ful medames*. "Vegetarian?" Hannibal asks with a raised eyebrow.

"It's my favorite dish here," Will replies as he hands their menus back with a nod of thanks. Then, he sighs, and leans one elbow on the table, wiping his hand over his mouth. He still looks incredibly tired, enough that Hannibal feels the strange compulsion to tell him to go take a nap. "I can't help wondering about the timing of this whole thing."

"The timing," Hannibal repeats.

Will nods. "The copycat shows up, and then this new player comes in with the same level of theatrics." He presses his lips together and shakes his head. "I can't help wondering if he came to the same conclusion I did, and he's trying to debut his solo career."

"You think he wants to contact the Ripper?" Hannibal asks, frowning.

"Either that, or he is the Ripper, but I don't think that's the case," Will says with another shake of his head. "It doesn't fit the M.O. I think this cello player wants to make a friend. To play in his sandbox," Will replies with another nod. "Which is foolish," he adds. "The Ripper doesn't like company."

"What makes you say that?"

"If you went through life, looking at people as pigs, as prey, how would you feel if one of them tried to become your friend?" Will asks, his eyes sharp on Hannibal's face.

Hannibal smiles. "You're obsessed," he says. Will growls, dropping his gaze. "Am I going to have to fight both you and Jack and stop you seeing everything with Ripper-tinted glasses?"

"Like I said," Will says shortly, "it's just a theory."

"A lot of serial killers, when caught, have been found to have hoarded magazine clippings and case studies of their murders," Hannibal says. "It's a way of reliving them, and satisfies the common strain of narcissism in their brains."

Will's eyes flash. "Are you implying that I'm a narcissist?" he asks.

"Only if, by extension, you are also a serial killer," Hannibal says with a smile.

Will huffs. "I've killed a lot of people," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "More than you have, probably. A lot of people die in surgery."

Hannibal smiles and fights back the urge to challenge Will on their kill counts. It wouldn't do him any favors, and if Will wants to poke at his pride, he will have to find another way to do it.

"One could argue that was an act of God, not man," he replies, sitting forward. "Do you like playing God, Will? Or perhaps you like the idea of fighting Him." Will huffs, his expression caught between aggravated and embarrassed. "What would you make of God, if He ever sat in your patient's chair?"

"I'd have a lot of questions for him, that's for damn certain," Will says, taking another drink of his water. "What about you? You're not a religious man. If there is a God, what do you think of Him?"

"Just that my own sins pale in comparison to His."

Will smiles.

"Surgeons are high on the list of psychopath careers."

"So is law enforcement," Will replies. He tilts his head to one side, eyes flashing with mirth. "So we're just a couple of psychopaths, trying to catch another one."

"Takes one to catch one," Hannibal says, smiling when Will's smile widens. It's another one of his toothy smiles, and would look threatening out of context. It's one of Hannibal's favorites so far. "I'm simply saying that tying everything to the Ripper with so little evidence that he has even resurfaced is a rash decision, and could lead to mistakes being made."

"God forbid we catch the wrong killer," Will says smoothly. He sets his glass down, his fingers dragging down the condensation on the side of the glass. Then, Will sighs. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my life," he adds. "It's one of the benefits of being human."

"Monsters make mistakes too," Hannibal replies. "Otherwise they would never be caught."

Will tilts his head to one side, eyeing Hannibal for a moment. He hums, and then Hannibal's attention is drawn by their food being delivered. It smells fantastic, he'll admit, and looks delicious. Hannibal feels his stomach clench up with hunger and takes his first bite eagerly. The beef smells and tastes good, complimented nicely with the awazi sauce.

"How do you like it?" Will asks, nodding to his meal.

"It's delicious," Hannibal replies.

Will smiles, looking pleased. "I'm glad it's enough for your careful tastes," he says lightly, and takes a bite of his own food. Hannibal huffs, smiling into his next bite.

"You're teasing me again," Hannibal says after he swallows his mouthful, cooling the spiciness on his tongue with some ice water.

"You're easy to tease," Will replies happily, smiling at Hannibal. "I was under the impression you wanted to become friendly with me. Friends tease each other."

"You said my opinion of you changes like the wind," Hannibal says. Will nods. "So, too, does the amount of openness you seem willing to share with me. You must make up your mind, Doctor Graham: are we friends, or not?"

"I think the issue here is that neither of us are particularly adept at friendships." Hannibal blinks, humming in question. "I compartmentalize, Agent Lecter. I build associations, and forts."

"Associations come quickly."

Will grins. "So do forts."

"Tell me, then, am I to live in one of your forts? Or am I an army laying siege to it?"

"I guess that's up to you."

Hannibal presses his lips together, taking another bite, and thinks as he chews. He nods to Will's hand. "Tell me about your wife," he says.

Will's eyes drop to the tan line on his finger. He lets out an unsteady breath, fingers curling, and his hand twitches like he wants to pull it back but knows it would be an admission of guilt that he doesn't want Hannibal to see. "Ex," he corrects quietly. "We separated late last year."

"Right before the holiday season," Hannibal says, unable to stop the smug smile on his face. "Ouch."

"It was a mutual decision," Will says tightly, in a way that means it was most definitely *not* mutual. "Sometimes things don't work out."

"Were you married long?"

Will shakes his head. "Little less than a year," he replies with another sigh. "Makes or breaks the relationship, they say. That first year."

"I imagine it's hard to convince someone like you to see a marriage counsellor," Hannibal notes. "Doctors make the worst patients."

Will huffs, his smile turning a little more genuine. "I knew exactly what was wrong with our relationship," he replies. "Unfortunately, it just wasn't something I could fix. So I left."

Hannibal pauses, wondering if Will is lying to save face. But no, Will doesn't strike him as that particular kind of prideful. "A strange contradiction," he says. "Given your self-diagnosed ability to compartmentalize. One might argue that one of those things is a lie."

Will grins at him, lopsided and smug. "I can do it just fine," he replies softly, but there's a warning in his voice, telling Hannibal not to dig too deeply. "Not everyone can."

Hannibal smiles at him, accepting that. "Forgive me for prying," he says, and Will sits back in his seat with a hum. "Observation is a hard thing to turn off."

"I understand," Will replies quietly, and Hannibal knows that that is, in fact, the case. Will might be the only person Hannibal has met who truly *can* understand. "And it's a two-way street. You're very easy to talk to." Hannibal smiles, and Will sits forward again, picking absently at his food, before he takes another bite. He sighs and rubs a hand over his eyes, stifling a yawn behind his knuckles.

He meets Hannibal's eyes, and blushes. "Go on," he mutters. "You're dying to ask, I can tell."

"I told you; I like to know everything I can about my colleagues, and my friends," Hannibal says with a smile. "You knew what you were getting into."

Will huffs.

"Have you always had trouble sleeping?"

Will nods. "Insomniac from birth," he replies. "Helped when I would pull doubles at the hospital. Not so useful with a nine-to-five."

"Have you considered medication?"

Will nods again. "I, ah, tried it for a while," he replies. "But I found it dulled me too much. I didn't like it."

"Your mind is your most valuable tool," Hannibal murmurs. "I don't blame you."

"And what has you awake at five in the morning to go snooping through my notes?" Will asks with a fond smile. "Surely curiosity isn't that powerful of a drug, Agent Lecter."

Hannibal smiles. "It is for me," he replies mildly. "And the satisfaction when that curiosity is sated."

Will hums, regarding Hannibal for a long moment, before he lowers his eyes to his food and takes another bite. "I imagine solving this copycat murder will prove wonderfully satisfying, then."

"Yes," Hannibal replies, smiling. "For both of us."

After lunch, Hannibal drives Will to Tobias Budge's music shop. He parks on the other side of the road and they get out, crossing the street. There's a sign at the door with a little clock pointing to the top of the hour. It reads, in neat cursive 'Out to lunch, back in 30'. Will huffs.

"Not quite suspicious," he mutters, checking his watch. "He ought to be back soon."

Hannibal nods, looking around. There is an ice cream and coffee shop next to where he parked, and he nods to it with a smile. "Dessert?" he asks.

Will looks at him with a raised eyebrow. "Only psychopaths would get ice cream in forty-degree weather," he mutters.

"Indulge me," Hannibal replies, and Will rolls his eyes but follows Hannibal back across the street, into the ice cream shop. Hannibal gets a bottle of water and Will gets an Americano. They take a seat by the window that gives them a clear view of the shop, so they know when Tobias Budge returns.

Hannibal sips at his water, his eyes on the other side of the street. "What do you think we'll find?" he asks. "A string of corpses lined up with their guts removed?"

Will frowns, tilting his head to one side.

"The best strings are made from gut," Hannibal adds. "Creates a fuller sound."

"And you know this because…?"

"I was curious," Hannibal says, smiling.

Will nods. "And you are a connoisseur of the arts," he adds, pressing his lips together. He curls his hands around his coffee, soaking in the warmth from the cup without taking a drink. "If I might ask, how does a Baltimore FBI agent become so cultured?"

"The same way anyone does," Hannibal says. "They have a desire to be."

"The Opera and Symphony have always been staples of an elite class of people," Will says. "People who like the finer things in life. Gold filigree and four-digit champagne."

"Those things require money and connections," Hannibal says. "I have both, but the wrong kind."

"I imagine a cop's salary doesn't lend itself to fine living."

"Nor a psychiatrist's," Hannibal replies. "Unless you charge through the nose."

Will huffs, grinning. "I do," he says. "Because I can. But like I said, I don't think my soul was made for that kind of living." He sighs. "Sometimes I think about going to a cabin somewhere, shutting myself off from people. Most people, anyway."

"I imagine the things you see weigh heavily on you. They taint your dreams, sour your relationships."

Will frowns, biting his lower lip. He ducks his gaze. "I don't let them."

"It's hard to bond with people when all you see is what makes them flawed."

"Is that what you see people as?" Will asks. "Flawed?"

"The evidence is all around us," Hannibal says, sitting back and holding his hands out in an open gesture. "You think the man who killed our trombone player is alright in the head?"

"He probably thinks so," Will says quietly. "Men like that, they don't look at the world as normal people do."

"What would you do with your life, if you weren't in medicine?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. "When I was younger, I entertained the idea of being a writer," he says. Hannibal blinks, surprised at that.

"What did you want to write about?"

Will huffs. "Murder," he replies. Hannibal smiles. "I thought 'If Stephen King could do it, so can I'. I wanted to write the next great mystery. The killer no one could catch. But it turns out I'm not that much of a novelist. And I could never find the perfect inspiration."

"With your imagination? I highly doubt that."

"Imagination and talent are not the same thing, Agent Lecter," Will says with an indulgent smile. "Some people are blessed with one or the other. Some lucky few have both." He pauses, and takes a sip of his coffee. "What about you? What might you have been, if not a cop or an FBI agent?"

Hannibal hums, smiling. "I'm not sure," he replies, his eyes going back to the street. He takes another drink of water. "Maybe a bounty hunter, or a spy."

Will laughs, startled, his eyes bright. "I could see that," he says.

"Can you?" Hannibal asks playfully.

"Oh yes," Will replies lowly. "You have a very *James Bond* air of mystery around you."

Hannibal huffs, shaking his head. "I suppose I will always have the need to fight the good fight," he says.

Will smiles at him, his expression fond and pleased. Hannibal swallows and looks up as a car passes the ice cream shop and parks outside of the reserved space across the street. He sees a man getting out, well-dressed, with a thick wool coat going to his knees. The man is dark-skinned, tall, and Hannibal watches as he locks his vehicle and enters the music shop, removing the sign as he does so.

"I believe Mister Budge has just returned to his shop."

Will hums. "Either he's very confident, very stupid, or he's not our guy."

Hannibal smiles, finishing his bottle of water. "Aren't you dying to find out?"

Will stands, grinning back. "Lead the way."

They cross the street and Hannibal raps his knuckles twice on the door before pushing his way inside. A little bell dings above their heads and he looks around, taking in the hanging violins, the check-in station, the stairs leading down to a basement. He meets Will's eyes and nods to it.

Will's eyes follow his, and darken. He bites his lower lip.

The man comes out of his main room, stopping when he sees them. His eyebrows rise. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," he says, his low voice welcoming and gentle. His accent fits well with Baltimore elite. "How may I help you?"

"Mister Budge?" Hannibal asks, and he nods. "I'm Agent Lecter, with the FBI. This is Doctor Graham. We were hoping to ask you a few questions."

Tobias blinks at them, and nods. "Of course," he says, spreading his hands out in welcome. "How can I help?"

"We're investigating a murder," Hannibal says, as Will steps past them and into the main room of the shop. Hannibal can see sheet music stands, stringed instruments, as well as a grand piano within the other room. Tobias lets him pass, his eyebrows rising again. "At the Baltimore Opera House. A trombonist was killed there last night."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Tobias says. He looks surprised enough, from what Hannibal can glean.

"I was told you provide strings for the orchestra," Hannibal continues, and Tobias nods. "The victim's throat was opened up, and a cello neck was shoved in his mouth."

"A human cello?" Tobias asks. He huffs, baring white teeth, and shakes his head, sliding his hands into his pockets. He looks relaxed, at ease. He meets Hannibal's eyes and Hannibal sees something sharp, there. "Can't imagine it made a pretty sound. You can't just open someone up and play them."

"The strings were treated."

That's Will's voice, and Tobias turns to reveal Will standing at the doorway. He has a pack of violin strings in his hand. "Where do you get your strings, Mister Budge?"

"I source locally, for the plastic ones," Tobias replies, smiling. "But the best strings – the ones I supply for the orchestra – they're made of catgut. I import them from Italy."

Will raises his eyebrows. "A costly endeavor, I imagine," Hannibal says.

"It's worth it," Tobias replies with another smile. "Gut strings create a better sound, and the Italians are masters at making them."

"Would you say you're well-versed in string quality?" Will asks, setting the pack back down, not from where he took it. Hannibal sees Tobias' eyes flash in irritation, and he smiles when Tobias takes the pack and sets it back in his proper place, and Will returns to Hannibal's side.

"It's part of the job," Tobias replies. "I also teach, and as my students improve, I graduate them from plastic to gut. I would hate to have them playing on sub-par instruments."

"Where were you last night, around ten p.m.?" Hannibal asks.

Tobias hums. "I was at home. Alone. Unfortunately, no one can confirm that. Although I did have a pleasant conversation with my neighbor just before I went to bed, at around eleven at night. They can confirm my car was parked in my space all night."

"Are their many other string shops in Baltimore, or people you know who might have knowledge of treating strings?"

"Nothing comes to mind," Tobias replies mildly.

Hannibal nods. "Thank you, Mister Budge," he says. He takes a card out of his pocket with his phone number and hands it to him. "If you can think of anyone who might have the same expertise as you, please give me a call."

"I will," Tobias replies with a nod and a genial smile. "Good luck, Agent Lecter. Doctor Graham."

"Thank you again," Will says, and they exit the shop. Hannibal huffs, walking back to the car.

"I suppose the neighbor will be next, to confirm his alibi."

Will hums, getting into the car. "I think he did it," Will says.

Hannibal looks at him, eyebrows raised.

"Just a feeling," Will murmurs.

"Unfortunately, I need more evidence than just 'a feeling'," Hannibal replies.

Will presses his lips together. "You're right," he concedes. Then, he smiles, and reaches into his coat pocket, pulling out a pack of strings. "Can you have someone in your lab test these? To confirm if they're really catgut?"

Hannibal blinks, taking the pack of strings. He lets out an amused hum. "You are certainly proving to be an interesting partner, Will."

Will smiles, his cheeks pink. "If those are anything illegitimate, we'll know he was lying."

Hannibal smiles, pocketing the strings, and starts the car. "It may take a while to confirm," he says.

"I know," Will adds. "I have a plan."

"Care to share?"

"I'm going to go to the Symphony tomorrow," Will says. "I saw a performance on his poster board. It's tomorrow night. He had tickets to it. My ex bought me a standing box for my birthday one year, and I've never used it."

"You're going to alone, in the hopes of, what, cornering and interviewing a potentially dangerous man?" Hannibal asks, unable to stop the concern coming through in his voice.

"Of course not," Will says, grinning Hannibal's way. "You'll be coming with me. To protect me, and make sure I don't do anything…rash."

Hannibal laughs. "Perhaps you are the one who should have been a spy," he says.

Will smiles.

Chapter 6

Hannibal opens the door when Will knocks the next evening, and refrains from asking how Will got his address when Will blinks, eyes raking him up and down appreciatively. "You sure do clean up nicely, Agent Lecter," he says, clearing his throat, his cheeks turning pink as he sinks his hands deep into the pocket of his coat.

Hannibal smiles, stepping out and closing and locking his door behind him. "So do you," he replies, taking in Will's neater-styled hair, his clean-shaven jaw, the snatches of his suit that seem to fit him remarkably better than his dumpy sweaters and slacks. He looks years younger even without the beard, and as refined and lovely as a work of art.

Hannibal buttons his coat and brushes his hands down his stomach. "I must thank our killer once he's caught for the opportunity to see 'Fancy Will Graham'."

Will's cheeks darken, and he bites his lower lip. "Stop," he says, exasperated but pleased, and walks down the driveway towards his car. It's a silver Lexus and Hannibal fights the urge to roll his eyes.

"How did you know where I live?" Hannibal asks as he gets into the passenger seat.

"Jack told me," Will replies. "He also gave me a stern tongue-lashing over the idea of interrogating Budge at the Symphony."

"I've been on the receiving end of many tongue lashings from Jack," Hannibal says mildly. "I can't imagine it was pleasant."

"Well, luckily, since I'm not one of his subordinates, he couldn't expressly forbid me from going," Will says with a knowing smile, conspiratorial and soft. "I think he's angrier at you for letting me do it."

"Do you often get your partners in trouble with their superiors?" Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs one shoulder, his eyes shining as he pulls out of the parking lot. "Just the ones I like."

Hannibal hums, ignoring the warm flush of pleasure in his chest that those words bring. "So, what kind of answers do you think we'll get at this Symphony?" he asks.

Will shrugs one shoulder. "I want to see Budge in his natural habitat," he says. "The trombone player will have likely been replaced. If he shows any sort of satisfaction, we'll be able to see it."

"You put remarkable stock in your ability to observe."

"I've been told my deductive reasoning is quite good," Will replies mildly. "And yours."

"Do you think he'll confess? Jump up and yell 'You all should thank me, because of me the orchestra is finally worth a damn'?"

"Tease all you want," Will says. "Serial killers like to brag. And if my hunch is right, and Tobias did this particularly to get the Ripper's attention, he might let something slip."

"The Ripper," Hannibal repeats, sighing. "I never thought I'd hear so much about him from anyone other than Jack."

"I'm sorry to bore you," Will replies.

"You don't bore me," Hannibal murmurs.

"But the Ripper does?"

"*If* he has resurfaced," Hannibal says, holding up a finger, "then it means he will kill again, create a second in his group of three. Which means he will garner more attention and notoriety once again. But, like you said, he killed his groups quickly. Has there been another murder in his style since the copycat? No. And they would all be in the same place if your theory was true."

Will hums. "Maybe he's evolving," he says, his eyes fixed determinedly on the road.

Hannibal smiles, dropping his hand. "Perhaps."

Will doesn't say anything else until they pull up outside of the Opera House.

"Oh! Before I forget." Will leans over, opening the glove compartment, and pulls out a small black bag. He opens it and into his hand drop two golden wedding bands. He hands one to Hannibal. "Put this on."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, before he frowns at Will.

"Why?" he asks.

"It's our cover," Will says, sliding his ring onto his finger. It fits perfectly, and he looks at it, his fingers curling, and takes in another breath, shoulders rolling. "I have friends at the Symphony who know I was married, but they don't know I'm divorced. I can't be seen bringing strange men to the Opera House."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows again, looking down at the ring in his hand. He slides it onto his finger. "Your ex-wife had large hands," he notes.

Will hums, pressing his lips together. "Yes," he says. "He did."

He gets out without another word, and Hannibal blinks down at the golden band on his finger. He gets out of the car in a hurry and follows Will towards the entrance. He takes Will by the shoulder and turns him around. Will bites his lower lip but meets his eyes steadily; challenging.

"You had an ex-husband," Hannibal says, realizing only now that when Will spoke of his marriage, he didn't mention any particular gender.

Will swallows. He nods.

"Forgive me," Hannibal says. "I assumed."

"I know it makes some people uncomfortable," Will says tightly. "I'm hoping you'll overlook it for the sake of the case."

"Will -." Hannibal reaches out, stopping Will from turning away again. "Will, look at me." Will bites his lower lip and lifts his eyes again. "It doesn't make me uncomfortable," he says, heavily, meaningful. "I only wish you had felt relaxed enough to be open with me from the start."

"My love life isn't anyone's business," Will says. "But," he adds before Hannibal can reply, eyes flashing with understanding, "I'm making it your business. So, you're right. You should have known. I should have told you."

"Tobias Budge has met us before," Hannibal says, speaking more lowly as a couple pass them by. The woman is wearing more pearls than Hannibal has ever seen in his life, and he imagines the man's coat costs more than a month of his salary. "He knows we're not married."

Will huffs, swallowing harshly. "It's not for his sake I'm asking you to do this," Will replies. Hannibal hums, absently spinning the ring around on his finger. It's a lovely band, thick and shining like Will has spent a lot of time caring for it. "But there are worse things than suggesting that I'm married to a cop."

Hannibal smiles. "Don't worry, darling," he says, and holds out his hand for Will's arm. Will blinks at him, biting his lower lip, and takes it, his fingers curling into the crook of Hannibal's elbow. "I'll protect you."

"I can tell you're going to enjoy this," Will says quietly as they ascend the stairs.

Hannibal laughs. "I've always been a sucker for a good performance."

The Symphony is lovely. They perform Mozart's *Adagio and Fugue in F minor,* and *Symphony No. Nine in E-flat major,* as well as Stravinsky's *Violin Concerto in D major* and the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. It's a moving performance, and while Hannibal does his best to try and pick out Tobias Budge and keep tabs on him, he can't help being swept away by the music. It's so much more powerful listening to it live, Hannibal knows that he will treasure this memory for as long as he lives.

He stands when it comes time for the final applause, and Will joins him, smiling fondly when he meets Hannibal's eyes. Then, the audience disperses, and Will is approached by a thin-faced older woman with short-cropped hair, wearing an ivory dress.

"Will Graham, as I live and breathe!" she croons, leaning in for a kiss on each cheek. Will smiles, cupping her elbows, and then kisses her hand.

"Missus Komeda," he greets, his voice low and…flirtatious? Hannibal can't be sure. "It's been too long. How is Richard?"

"Oh, the same," she replies, waving her gloved hand with a dismissive air. Her eyes land on Hannibal, sharpening. "Is this the mysterious other half I've heard so much about?"

"Diane, let me introduce my husband, Hannibal Lecter," Will says, and Hannibal takes her hand and kisses her knuckles. She flushes, smiling wide enough to show her teeth.

"Mister Lecter," she purrs. "I've heard a lot about you, except your name and your face," she says, with a sharp, scolding look Will's way. Will smiles good-naturedly, shrugging one shoulder. "I must say, Will, his profile is *magnificent*."

Hannibal blinks, looking to Will, and Will smiles. "Missus Komeda is a novelist by day, an art collector by night," he explains. "She's particularly fond of Eastern-European artists."

"Positively regal," Missus Komeda purrs.

Hannibal smiles. "You're too kind."

Hannibal becomes aware of a shadow at Will's shoulder, and he turns to see a short, rotund gentleman, practically bobbing in place as he grins and tries to get Will's attention.

At his side is Tobias Budge.

"Doctor Graham," Missus Komeda says, one eyebrow arching. "I believe this young man is trying to get your attention."

Will turns, his smile softening into the classic psychiatrist smile Hannibal knows well, and he shakes the man's hand. "Hello, Franklyn," he says.

Franklyn cups Will's hand with both his own, shaking vigorously. "Hi!" he greets, rocking on his heels like Will's attention has floored him. "It's so great to see you! I've never seen you at the Opera before."

Will hums. He puts a hand on Hannibal's back and Hannibal meets Tobias' sharp eyes. The man smiles at him, closed-lipped and wide. "My husband is a great lover of Mozart," Will says. "He asked us to come and I couldn't deny him."

"Your…? Oh!" Franklyn's eyes turn to Hannibal and Hannibal smiles when he sees the expression on Franklyn's face – dismayed, dark. Jealous. It's not uncommon for people to form close attachments with their psychiatrists, and he can see in Franklyn's whole demeanor that he is deeply disheartened at the idea of Will being married.

Franklyn holds out his hand and Hannibal shakes it. "Nice to meet you."

"And you," Hannibal replies.

Franklyn clears his throat. "And this is my friend, Tobias," Franklyn says, gesturing to Tobias like the fact that Tobias is standing next to him is the greatest achievement of his life.

"Doctor Graham," Tobias says smoothly, shaking Will's hand. "Agent Lecter. I'm surprised to see you here."

"You know each other?" Franklyn asks.

"Yes," Tobias replies, his eyes sharp. "They came by my shop yesterday to question me about strings."

"Oh! I remember you telling me about that," Franklyn says brightly.

Will clears his throat. Hannibal puts a hand on his back. "Shall I get us something to drink, darling?" he asks.

Will's eyes flash, and he nods, managing a bright, fond smile. "Please."

"I'll join you," Tobias says, and Hannibal nods, going with him down to the lower level where the bar is. It's relatively empty, people more interested in mingling and going to the rest of their nights than staying behind in a Symphony bar. "It seems you and your friend are full of surprises."

"A coincidence, nothing more," Hannibal says, flagging down the bartender. He orders and pays for two glasses of champagne, mentally wincing at the price, and Tobias does the same for him and Franklyn.

Tobias hums, taking a sip of his drink. He doesn't seem to be in a hurry to rejoin their companions. "I'd like to tell you a story, Agent Lecter," he says.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

"It's about a humble string shop owner. Who, after being interrogated by two strange men about a murder, follows one of those men later that night. Out of town. And then out of state."

Hannibal goes tense, meeting Tobias' gaze. Tobias' smile widens.

"I won't tell anyone," he murmurs, taking another drink. "About what I saw you do. And do well."

Hannibal curses under his breath. He should have been able to sense someone tailing him, but he'd been hungry and distracted from his day with Will, too busy thinking about the man's smile and the shine of his eyes to even take pleasure in his hunt. "I'm confused," Hannibal says. "I thought this was just a story."

"Allow me to tell another one," Tobias says, leaning in and lowering his voice. "This story is about a pretty doctor who digs his nose in a little too deep and ends up…well." He huffs a laugh. "I won't spoil how it ends."

Hannibal clears his throat.

"It's not often I find a kindred spirit," Tobias adds. "One who sees the world the way I do. Who thinks like I do. I think we should become friends."

"How unfortunate," Hannibal replies mildly, "given that I have no interest in being your friend."

"That is unfortunate," Tobias purrs, not looking bothered in the slightest. He turns and heads up the stairs and Hannibal spies Will, swallowing back his desire to rush to him and put himself between Will and Tobias' sharp eyes.

"Perhaps I should tell you a story," Hannibal says mildly, walking slowly over. Will appears deep in conversation with Franklyn and another man and Hannibal knows he's distracted. "About a humble string shop owner who bit off more than he could chew."

Tobias laughs. It draws Will's attention, and he smiles, taking the glass of champagne Hannibal offers him. "You were gone a while," Will notes, taking a sip. "Should I be worried?"

"Of course not, darling," Hannibal replies, putting a hand on Will's back. "I was simply sharing stories with Mister Budge, here."

"Oh, I'd be delighted to hear them sometime!" Will says. Hannibal must admit, he's playing this role very well, down to the innocence in his eyes and the kindness of his smile. "Tobias, Franklyn, you must come to dinner with Hannibal and me tomorrow night."

Franklyn positively lights up, and Tobias looks between Will and Hannibal, before he gives them a cordial smile. "I'd be delighted," he says.

"Excellent," Will replies, clinking their glasses together. "Now, if you don't mind, I promised my husband we'd try a new port we have at home. I fear I will never hear the end of it if we delay. Have a good night!"

He loops his hand in Hannibal's arm and steers him away from the pair, down towards the bar. Hannibal fights the urge to look over his shoulder and he gives a hum. "Dinner?" he asks.

Will nods. "Franklyn has told me some very strange things," he says, sipping his champagne. "Did you manage to shed some light on our friend?"

"I have no doubt in my mind that he killed the trombonist," Hannibal murmurs, speaking lowly.

Will nods again. "So we just need a confession," he says. "Or we can arrest him. Quietly. He can be held for a while without charge unless he gets a good lawyer. Until the string tests come back."

"We must be careful, Will," Hannibal says. "He knows we're onto him. I have no doubt he has the capacity to turn violent." Then; "So you invited him to dinner?"

Will smiles. "Well, you said your sanctuary was the kitchen," he replies. "I assumed that means you can cook. Was I wrong?"

"I can cook," Hannibal says. "And well."

"I'll help you bring any equipment you need to my house. We'll host it there, for appearances' sake," Will says. He sighs. "The trap is set; the bait is laid down. Now we just have to convince the fish to bite."

"How to you get a fish to bite when he has no interest in food?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. "Using live bait," he replies. "You get him excited. You make him think that there is nothing in the world but him, and that bait. We need to make him think he'll be getting something out of confessing to us."

Hannibal pauses, pressing his lips together. He finishes his glass and sets it down, and Will leaves his half-full as they walk arm-in-arm out of the Opera House. "I think I might have an idea how we can do that."

"Oh?"

"Tobias told me a story," he says. "As loathe as I am to admit it, given your predisposition and knowing you'll take it as being right, I believe he wants to make friends with the Ripper. He wants to get his attention."

Will's eyes flash. "What happened to 'If the Ripper has resurfaced'?" he challenges.

"Well, Tobias thinks he might have."

"I don't understand how this conversation could have come up."

"Because Tobias thinks that I am the Ripper," Hannibal says.

Will stops, and Hannibal turns to regard him. They're in front of Will's car and Will frowns at him, cocking his head to one side. "Why on Earth would he think that?" he demands.

Hannibal smiles, putting his hands in his pockets. "I may have…inferred it," he thinks. "Like you said; serial killers like to brag. If Tobias thinks I am a killer, he may be more open to sharing."

"So, you made him believe you're a serial killer?" Will asks. Then, he huffs. "And I thought *my* methods were unconventional."

"I'm afraid I must ask you to pretend for another night," Hannibal says mildly. "That we are married. And that I'm a murderer. You can pretend you know that too, if you think it'll be more entertaining."

Will hums. "The wide-eyed, innocent husband, or the only one in on your deep, dark secret?" He smiles, sly and wide. "Which would you prefer, Agent Lecter?"

Hannibal smiles. "Surprise me," he says, and opens the car door, getting inside. Will follows suit, starting the car. As they leave, Hannibal sees Franklyn and Tobias leaving the Opera House, walking close together in the same way a puppy will always try and get underfoot. Hannibal feels a flash of irritation on behalf of Tobias – he thinks he would likely become a killer just to release some aggression towards such an annoying friend.

Will drives up outside of Hannibal's apartment and parks the car. "I'll come by tomorrow to help you with anything you'll need to bring over."

"Are you expecting to fill two cars?" Hannibal asks, smiling.

Will shrugs. "I've seen some fancy kitchen equipment," he replies. "And I expect the full husband experience from you, Agent Lecter. We'll need to pull out all the stops for our guests."

Hannibal laughs, and pulls the ring off of his finger, handing it to Will. Will takes it after a second of hesitation, his fingers curling tightly around the ring as he lowers his hand. "Thank you again," he murmurs, "for understanding. For pretending for me."

"I get it," Hannibal replies. "Reputation means everything to people like that."

Will cocks his head to one side. "You don't group me in among those people?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. His fingers curl. In the dark, intimate space in the car, it doesn't seem unreasonable to reach out and cup Will's cheek. But he resists, and finds himself wondering how far Will might go to pretend in a setting like his home. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says, and Will nods. Hannibal waits until Will drives away before he enters his apartment and shuts the door.

He goes to his kitchen and pulls out his Rolodex of recipes. He will have to find the perfect one and make sure he has all the ingredients necessary to put on a meal that Will shall to forget.

Chapter 7

The next day, Hannibal drives up to and parks outside of Will's house. It is a lovely building in a rich part of town, and he knows his beaten-up vehicle looks out of place amongst the shiny BMWs and Lincoln town cars. There is a space next to Will's car and he parks there, turning off the engine and climbing out of the car.

He walks up to the door and knocks, receiving no answer.

He frowns. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't be worried, but Will had antagonized a killer not even twenty-four hours previously, and his car is parked outside. He knocks again, and when he still hears no movement from inside, he checks the handle.

The door is unlocked, and swings inward after he turns the handle. Hannibal's frown deepens, he presses his lips together, and slowly slides his gun from the hostler at his side. He cradles the gun gently and steps in, closing the door behind him.

"Will?" he calls, stalking down the dark hallway. He doesn't see any signs of a scuffle, no wayward shoes kicked to one side or coats ripped from their hangers in the hallway closet. There is a light on at the end of the hallway and he walks towards it, trying to stay as silent as possible.

"Will?" he calls again, and reaches into his pocket to take out his phone in case he needs to call for backup. He passes a doorway and spies a kitchen inside, plainly decorated. Nothing appears out of order, and the room is dark. He continues down the hallway towards where the light is.

He doesn't hear any movement upstairs. The door beyond is half-cocked, letting a shaft of light in. Hannibal presses close to it and spies a dining area beyond. He can see the shadow of someone sitting at the end of the table, like they're waiting for him.

He pushes the door open, gun ready, and freezes when Will looks up at him, his eyes flashing in surprise. Will tenses, breathing out shakily when Hannibal straightens and lowers his gun. "Good lord," he mutters, wiping his hand over his face. The table is empty and in front of him sits an iPad and a notebook. "Gonna give people heart attacks, skulking around like that."

"I called for you," Hannibal says, putting his gun and phone away. "You didn't answer," he adds, somewhat sharply.

"You did?" Will asks, his brow furrowing. Then he sighs and shakes his head. "Sorry. I was… lost in thought. I'm sorry I didn't come meet you to help you move things."

"I could have been anyone," Hannibal says curtly, stepping into the room and leaving the door open. "You ought to be more careful."

Will offers him a tight smile. Then, his eyes go back to the iPad, and his expression darkens. "Do you read a lot of Miss Lounds' work?" he asks.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "When it is entertaining," he replies, approaching Will. Will huffs, his mouth tight with anger. "What is it?"

"See for yourself," Will mutters, and turns the iPad so Hannibal can see. He picks it up, his eyes alighting on a photograph of himself and Will, standing close together outside of the Opera House. He frowns – this was taken from last night. Hannibal recognizes Will's body language as when he had been apologizing for lying about the nature of his ex-husband.

The title reads, in big block font: *FBI GETS A LITTLE TOO UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL.*

"What is this?" Hannibal growls, sitting down at Will's side.

Will rolls his eyes. "Apparently Miss Lounds is under the impression that your marriage to me is news-worthy."

"She spoke to you at the crime scene," Hannibal notes, scrolling through the article, skimming over the text. "She has made some…rather disparaging remarks about us both."

"I'm aware," Will growls, unable to hide the anger in his voice. "She researched me."

"I can see that," Hannibal says, as he gets to the paragraph that he is sure has incited Will so. "I…. Forgive me. I don't have to read this if you don't want me to."

"You may as well," Will says, pushing himself to his feet. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Please," Hannibal replies, and Will nods and leaves the room, heading through a second door that leads to the kitchen. Hannibal sits back, reading the article. In it, Freddie has summarized the same information Hannibal found, about Will's previous career and his accomplishments. But there is more than that – there is, within the article, details about Will's notoriety. The 'crazy' theories that had gotten him fired from his time at the hospital. The obsession that had ruined his marriage.

Will returns with two glasses of wine, and sets one down in front of Hannibal. Hannibal closes the iPad and takes the glass, lifting it to his nose. It's a sweet, dark red wine, and he hums in appreciation and takes a sip.

Will sits back down with a sigh, running his hand through his hair. He drums his fingers on the edge of his notebook and Hannibal can see that half a page has been filled with his strange pictograph notes, but the book is open half-way.

"You can ask," Will says quietly, his eyes on his writing.

Hannibal hums. "Only if you want to tell me."

Will sighs, sitting forward and rubbing his hands over his face. "She must have spoken to Randall," he whispers, shaking his head and holding it in his hands, looking down at the table. "That's the only way she could have known."

"Randall is…your ex?" Hannibal says.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "I suppose I'm lucky," he says, sighing and sitting back. He takes his glass of wine and swallows half of it in one drink. "People like Missus Komeda don't read *TattleCrime*."

"If it's any consolation, reading this doesn't sour your reputation with me," Hannibal murmurs, locking the iPad and sliding it back to Will.

Will's eyes flash to his, and his smile is a little more genuine. "I am glad to hear that," he replies, full of relief. He looks back down at his notes and sighs, closing the book. "When I worked at the hospital and was still practicing therapy part-time, I started to see…patterns. In the people I treated. People called me crazy, obsessed, whatever else you might want to call it, I'd heard it said about me. They think I see the Ripper everywhere."

"I'm confused," Hannibal murmurs. "I was under the impression that the Ripper doesn't leave his victims in a state where they would go under your care."

"I treated Randall when he younger," Will says. "Kept it professional, until he was cured. Then, a year later, we ran into each other again. He worked at a museum. He had such a… way of looking at the world. I was drawn to it. Then…"

Will hesitates, pressing his lips together. He takes another drink of wine.

"What happened, Will?"

"The first body…I couldn't save him," Will whispers. "He was practically torn to shreds, but by nothing natural. It looked like an animal attack, but I could see that it wasn't. And when the second body was rolled into my O.R., I realized the attacks would happen on nights I had to pull doubles, on nights when Randall would be left alone. When the third one happened, I couldn't ignore it."

"You believe Randall was attacking these people?"

"I don't know," Will replies coldly. "I left before I could confront him. I couldn't bear to know the truth. Last I heard he was in Wisconsin."

"I remember these attacks," Hannibal says. "They haven't repeated since last year."

Will hums, clenching his jaw. "I suppose that confirms my suspicions anyway," he says darkly. His eyes meet Hannibal's again, and then he looks away. "I don't know why I was so blind, all those years. I suppose it's easy to let yourself look through rose-tinted glasses when you're convinced you're in love. Even now, I want to remember his joy, his zest for life. I don't want to think that he's a murderer."

"You told me you knew why the relationship was doomed," Hannibal says, and Will nods. "You knew. Yet you did nothing."

"I couldn't prove it," Will says, shrugging one shoulder. "And if I was wrong? What would you do if the man you loved claimed you were a monster?"

"Is this what sparked your obsession with the Ripper?" Hannibal asks.

Will swallows, taking another drink of wine until his glass is empty. He sets it down and wipes a hand over his mouth. "I vowed that I would never let myself be blinded again," he says. "I would never let my feelings or my doubts stop me from knowing the truth. If the Ripper has resurfaced, I will catch him, Agent Lecter. I have to."

"Do not go from being blind to seeing monsters where they do not exist," Hannibal warns, taking another sip of his wine. Despite Will's obvious distress, he can't help but acknowledge the feeling in his chest as being *giddy*. Will claims to see monsters and yet is still blinded by the one sitting at his very table. "Do you think it will make amends, if you catch this killer, for your failings with your ex?"

"It has to mean something," Will replies. "Even after I left, Randall never pursued me. He never tried to hurt me, all the time we were together." He sighs, swallowing. "I suppose that's as close as a monster can come to love."

Hannibal regards him for a long moment. The lights in Will's dining room are intimate and soft, creating a glow much like firelight. He sets his wine glass down and leans forward, taking Will's hand in a gentle touch.

Will looks at him.

"I'm glad you told me, Will," Hannibal says quietly, making sure Will can see the sincerity in his eyes. "Your honesty and comfort are things I place at a high priority."

Will huffs, a weak smile crossing his face. "Thank you, Agent Lecter," he replies, squeezing Hannibal's fingers before he lets go. "Now, again, I must apologize for failing to meet you at your apartment. Is there anything else you need to bring?"

Hannibal smiles, allowing Will to change the subject. "Thankfully, everything I need could fit in my car," he says, and stands. Will follows suit. "Shall we?"

Will helps Hannibal bring in the food and cooking items that he will need, and Hannibal splays them out over his kitchen counter, effortlessly taking control of the space. "My landlord kept the place fully stocked," Will says. "Unfortunately, I don't know how to make anything more complicated than spaghetti."

Hannibal laughs. "Well, if you'd like to learn, I shall be more than happy to teach you," he replies.

Will smiles, cheeks turning pink. "Sure," he says, holding out his hands in an open gesture. "Tell me what to do, Chef."

Hannibal smiles, and gestures to the whole chicken and the turkey wings he has brought. "Wash these and place them in a pot with enough water to cover them," he says, handing Will a large stockpot. Will nods, washing his hands and then rinsing the meat and filling the pot

with water. Hannibal takes out a cutting board and starts to cut the carrots and celery into large chunks. "Bring the water to a boil."

Will obeys, heating the stove top and placing the water with the meat on top of it. "Will it need stirring?" he asks.

"Not yet," Hannibal replies. "Here." He hands Will a head of garlic, and a pestle and mortar. "Peel and grind this."

Will nods, standing next to Hannibal as he finishes with the vegetables. "I suppose you at least have salt and pepper?" Hannibal asks.

Will rolls his eyes and jerks his head to the cabinets behind them. "Right above the stove," he says, and Hannibal opens the cabinet, positively dismayed at Will's lack of spices and flavorings. The only thing other than salt and pepper that he sees is baking soda and Pam spray.

"I shall have to make sure you're properly stocked when I cook for you again," he says, taking the salt and pepper and setting them on the counter next to the pot.

Will hums. "How long have you been cooking?" he asks.

"Since I can remember," Hannibal replies. "I learned the art a long time ago – how to make meals last, how to make ramen taste like anything other than ramen, when I was in the Academy."

Will laughs, showing his teeth. "I could never see you eating *ramen*," he teases.

"When needs must," Hannibal replies with a shrug. "The noodles themselves are not entirely unhealthy. Just what you Americans put in them to make them palatable."

Will hums. "What part of Europe are you from?"

"I was born in Lithuania," Hannibal replies. Will blinks at him and Hannibal smiles. "But I moved to Paris when I was still a teenager, and then spent a long time in Italy before moving here."

"Why America?" Will asks, as Hannibal turns to the boiling water and lowers the heat so that it will simmer. He pours in the vegetables, with thyme, bay leaves, salt, and pepper, and covers the bowl almost all the way to allow it to steep. "Why Baltimore?"

Hannibal hums. "I like Baltimore," he replies. "And after Italy, I figured the best use of my talents would be in the United States." He turns and regards Will, adding blandly; "The crime rate here is astronomical."

Will huffs, smiling. "Yes," he says. "There's no shortage of evil in this place."

"Do you think all crimes are because of evil?" Hannibal asks.

Will presses his lips together. "Through my studies, and all my patients, I have found one common cause," he says.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side.

"Destruction," Will finishes. "The desire to destroy a body, destroy an idea, or destroy oneself. That desire is cancerous, and I see it as evil."

"And what do you think the Ripper wants to destroy?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. "Another reason I find him so fascinating," he replies, setting the pestle and mortar down. He rubs his thumb into his other palm, kneading at the sore skin there. Hannibal makes a curious sound and Will smiles, going briefly to the dining room to retrieve their wine glasses and refilling his from a bottle by the fridge.

"So you do not think he wants to destroy?" Hannibal presses.

"That's just it," Will replies, taking a drink of his wine. His cheeks are already flushed, from the heat in the kitchen and the alcohol in his system. Hannibal wonders if he has even eaten yet. "Desire comes from passion. It's a need, to do something. Destruction is at its heart the need to conquer and to overcome. I do not think the Ripper views his victims as things he must overcome – rather, he is a King in his own land, and he hunts people like deer or boar."

Hannibal hums, a flicker of recognition stirring in the back of his head. "You once compared me to a King," he says. "When we first met."

Will nods, smiling. "I still believe you are as such," he replies. "Tell me, Agent Lecter, if the Ripper were to come to your home and hearth, and ask you for food and a warm bed for the night, would you let him, knowing that he has ravaged your land and enslaved your people?"

"You speak as if I would know him on sight," Hannibal says. "You of all people should know monsters do not always appear as such."

Will pauses, his eyes meeting Hannibal's, before he sighs, and nods. "You're right," he replies, taking another drink of wine. "For all I know, you could be the Ripper."

Hannibal swallows. "Well, that will be my role tonight," he says, as smoothly as he can manage. "Perhaps it would do good to pretend, and try and see his mindset."

Will smiles. "I think I will pretend to know," he murmurs. "It will be more fun that way."

Hannibal huffs. "With Franklyn in the room, it will be difficult to get Tobias to confess."

"You let me worry about Franklyn," Will replies. "He's a good soul. Too kind. Too eager for affection. But he's good."

"He seemed very happy to see you yesterday."

"Yes," Will murmurs, huffing a breath and blowing a wayward curl from his forehead. "Unfortunately." He turns and eyes the simmering pot. "How long will that need to go for?"

"Three to four hours," Hannibal replies.

Will raises an eyebrow, cradling his glass of wine. "Do you often make food that takes so long?" he asks. "Or do you just like my company that much?"

Hannibal laughs. "Can't it be both?"

Will smiles down at his wine, his cheeks darkening. "Have you done this often?" he asks, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Gone undercover? Pretended to be something you're not, for the sake of the case?"

Hannibal shakes his head.

"I must be special, then."

"There are many things about you that I think are special, Will," Hannibal murmurs. "Your ability to adapt to any situation with ease is just one of them. Perhaps when this is over you will give consideration to assisting the FBI more often."

"You just like having me around."

Hannibal shrugs, and doesn't reply.

"Come on," Will says, and leads the way back into the dining room. "We may as well sit if we're to be waiting hours for…what is it you're making?"

"It's a Russian dish, called 'Aspic'," Hannibal replies, taking a seat at Will's right hand. "It's a savory gelatin dish. I haven't made it in a long time. It's traditionally served at New Year's."

"A dish for change and evolution," Will notes.

"I suppose."

"We are constantly evolving creatures, Agent Lecter," Will murmurs. "We adapt, or we go the way of the dodo."

"Humans are invasive," Hannibal replies. "We are conquerors."

Will smiles, drumming his fingertips on his notebook. Hannibal's eyes fall to it and he clears his throat, taking a sip of wine. "May I see?" he asks, and Will nods, sliding the notebook across to him. Hannibal opens it, humming at the pages of pictographic code. Not a single English word in sight. "Do you write all of your notes in this language of yours?"

"Yes," Will replies.

"May I ask why?"

"For people like you, who are too curious," Will says, smiling gently; teasing. Then his smile fades and he nods to the pages. "This is an old book," he murmurs.

"Who is it about?" Hannibal asks.

Will clears his throat, looking away. "Randall," he replies quietly.

"Did you wish to remind yourself of what he was like when you first met?" Hannibal asks, remembering Will's comment about his notes regarding Hannibal himself. In a year, or ten years from now, Will wants to know what he was thinking when they first met; the things he observed, and what has changed and what has not.

Will sighs, nodding. "I don't think I would recognize him again," he replies. "Especially now."

"His betrayal has hurt you deeply."

"I'm not sure it can count as a betrayal," Will murmurs. "He owes me nothing. No silence, no loyalty. Just as I owe him nothing."

"You said you cured him," Hannibal says, turning another page.

"Clearly I failed."

"You must not look at Randall as an example of failure," Hannibal murmurs, closing the book and pushing it back to Will. "Therapy is a constant – once entered into, the patient can choose to become dependent on their therapist, and there are many conditions that have no cure so much as coping mechanisms that develop as a result of therapy or medication. If Randall wanted to behave as a beast, there is no treatment for that. There's only so much you could have done."

"You sound like my old boss," Will replies darkly. "When a man bleeds out, when he gets septic and doesn't respond to antibiotics, when a woman dies as a result of a collapsed lung and the ambulance is too slow in traffic – *those* are things I cannot help. But Randall…" He sighs, shaking his head. "I feel like his sins are mine."

"I cannot absolve you of those sins, Will," Hannibal says quietly. "Only you can do that."

Will smiles, strained and tired. He has dark circles under his eyes. The timestamp of Freddie's last article had been the early hours of the morning and Hannibal wonders if Will had even been asleep when it first came up. If he has slept since.

Then, he sighs. "Thank you, Agent Lecter," he breathes, and takes another drink of wine. "I am…glad that you're here with me."

Hannibal smiles. "I would rather be nowhere else," he replies, and is surprised at how much he means it. Sitting with Will in his golden-colored room, he feels settled and happy. Even with the promise of a dangerous meal ahead of them, this moment feels intimate in a way seldom else does.

Will's smile widens, turning genuine and pleased again. He stands and takes the notebook, placing it on a shelf on one side of the fireplace. Hannibal can see there are many others just

like it, just like the ones in Will's study. Previous patients, he imagines. There are more than he can count at a glance.

"You have not been a full-time therapist long," Hannibal murmurs when Will sits down again. Will nods. "Are these all your patients?"

Will looks at the rows and rows of books, pressing his lips together, before he shakes his head. "No," he replies quietly.

"Your novel, then?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head again. "Those are…the top shelf are closed patients," he says, cocking his head to one side. Hannibal lets his eyes fall down the rest of the notebooks. There are at least three other shelves full of those books. "The rest are on the Ripper."

Hannibal blinks, raising his eyebrows, and looks at Will again.

"He and I talk a lot," Will murmurs.

"Perhaps, one day, you will let me read them," Hannibal says.

Will huffs a laugh, and Hannibal turns his eyes back to the books. There are so many, all full of words about him, about his kills and his crimes. He nods to himself, decided. He will have to figure out Will's code, to know what Will thinks of him, what he says about him. If any of those notes are too close to the truth.

As a matter of survival.

Chapter 8

After a while, Will swaps his wine for whiskey, golden-colored in his glass. Hannibal doesn't comment, but accepts a refill of wine when Will offers it to him.

"Have you eaten?" he asks, and Will shakes his head, biting his lower lip.

Hannibal stands, and goes to the kitchen. Will follows, and Hannibal checks the stock as it continues to simmer. It still has about three hours left by his timing, which is plenty of time to make Will something else to eat.

"You brought enough food for two meals?" Will asks, frowning when Hannibal opens his fridge and takes out the pack of ground meat he'd brought over as well. If Will asks, he will say it's beef. The color is nice and red, and he smiles as he sets it out on the counter.

"You wanted the full husband experience, didn't you?" Hannibal replies.

Will huffs, shaking his head with a fond smile. "You don't have to," he says. "My take-out menu drawer is fully stocked."

Hannibal resists the urge to grimace at the idea of ordering *take-out*. "I insist," he replies mildly. "I can't have you going hungry."

"You have a strangely nurturing side to you," Will murmurs, watching as Hannibal roots through his cabinets and finds a frying pan, placing it on the stovetop next to the pot of chicken and turkey stock. "Do you often cook for guests?"

"The friends I keep with me are few and far between," Hannibal replies. "But, when occasion calls for it, I'm more than happy to serve."

Will smiles, and takes another sip of whiskey. Hannibal unwraps the meat and pours some olive oil into the pan, waiting until it starts to bubble from the heat before he sets the meat inside. "Do you have a spatula?"

"Somewhere," Will murmurs, and sets his glass down, opening a drawer by the sink to pull it out. Hannibal catches the sight of two sets of utensils inside and nothing else.

"Do we have enough plates and utensils here to even serve four people?"

Will shrugs one shoulder. "I'll get the fancy stuff out, when Tobias and Franklyn get here," he replies.

Hannibal accepts that with a nod. He takes some more garlic and an onion from Will's fridge, slices both up finely, and places it in the pan as the meat starts to turn grey, and then brown.

"The fancy stuff?" he repeats after a moment.

Will manages a tight smile. "When Randall and I got married, his mother gave us a set of expensive ceramic plates, and a serving dish. At least, I assume it was expensive. Randall came from money."

"He must have, to afford you as a therapist."

Will hums. "For all the good it did."

"Do you think, if you were ever to receive concrete proof that Randall did what you think he did, that you would still hold onto his memory as you have?"

Will blinks at him, frowning when Hannibal meets his gaze. "It's not a question of holding onto his memory," Will murmurs. "Merely how those memories make me feel. I don't want to lose that."

"For someone who self-professes their ability to compartmentalize, I'm confused at your nostalgia."

Will smiles at him. "Are you sure you weren't a therapist in your former life?" he asks, teasing, and picks up his drink again. There's a loaf of bread on the kitchen counter, and Hannibal takes a knife block out and begins to slice thick pieces of it.

"I find the human mind fascinating," Hannibal says mildly. "There are so many things that can go wrong with it."

Will nods, sighing into his glass, and takes another drink. The alcohol is making his cheeks pink and his eyes are a little glazed already. Hannibal has already seen evidence of Will's less than stellar diet, and swallows back the desire to offer to cook for him more often.

When the meat is done and the scent of it fills the kitchen, Hannibal takes two plates from Will's cabinet and evenly divides the meat between them, lining the edge with two slices of bread each. "Shall we?" he asks, and Will nods, taking the plates from him and leading the way back into the dining room. Hannibal gathers their drinks and two forks, and follows, and Will goes back into the kitchen one more time to retrieve butter and a knife for it.

Will sits down at the head of the table and takes a bite of the meat. He swallows, blinking like he's surprised, and wipes his hand over his mouth. "Delicious," he says, and Hannibal smiles.

"I hope it proves a good audition piece for the aspic," he replies.

Will laughs, and reaches forward for the butter, taking it and slicing a hefty amount onto the bread, smearing it around. "I have faith," he says, and Hannibal smiles, taking a bite of his own food. It's a simple enough dish, of course, but good meat is hard to come by nowadays. And Hannibal will admit he delights in watching Will eat whatever is put in front of him, especially when it is Hannibal providing it. "I can't remember the last time someone cooked for me."

"If we survive the night, I'd be more than happy to do so as often as you'd like," he replies.

"My own personal chef?" Will asks, teasing again. The shadow of old pain is all but gone from his eyes and Hannibal is glad to see their normal vibrancy return.

"We must make use of this time," Hannibal says. "With Franklyn here, as I said, conversation topics may prove difficult, if we are to get a confession out of our killer."

"What did Tobias Budge tell you about, when you fetched drinks for us?" Will asks. "I'm incredibly curious how you managed to imply to him that you were the Ripper."

Hannibal smiles. "I'll admit, he chose to threaten us," he says. Will blinks at him, frowning. "He seemed surprised to see us, apparently a married couple, and warned us not to dig too deeply into his night time activities."

"Unprompted?" Will asks, and shakes his head. "I can't imagine."

Hannibal presses his lips together. "Well," he begins, taking another bite of food and washing it down with wine. Here is where he will need to begin the lie. He can only hope Will's sharp eyes don't see through it. "I asked him about the orchestra, and he told me that they were better after the tragic loss of the trombonist. When I asked him what he thought about it, he… threatened you."

"Me," Will says, frowning again. He swallows and takes another bite of his food.

"Yes," Hannibal says with a nod. Will presses his lips together, idly turning his glass around between his fingers. "I have the utmost confidence in my ability to keep you safe."

Will manages a tight smile. "I have no doubt of that," he replies. "I suppose it's a good thing you came over when you did. Like you said, anyone could have happened upon me."

Hannibal smiles. "I want to protect your sense of safety, Will," he says. "I don't want you to have to feel like you need to look around every corner and jump at every shadow."

Will huffs a laugh, shaking his head. "Agent Lecter," he murmurs, "I'm not sure that's something you can defend. Naiveite gets people like you and me killed."

"So does pretending to play dumb," Hannibal replies.

Will nods. "I suppose," he says, taking a bite of bread and swallowing harshly, washing it down with whiskey. "Thankfully I know this monster is coming."

When the aspic is ready, Hannibal has Will strain out the bones and peel the meat apart, and takes a serving dish from Will's cabinets. He strains the broth once, taking the meat and vegetables and laying them in the bottom of the dish, and then strains it again until the stock is a fine golden color.

"Smells great," Will murmurs, watching as Hannibal pours what is left over into the dish and covers it with Clingfilm.

"Now we must let it set," Hannibal says, setting the dish in Will's sparsely-filled fridge. He washes his hands and sets the cooking implements into the sink, filling the large bowl with soapy water and allowing the other dishes to soak inside.

"Tobias and Franklyn will be here soon," Will murmurs. "Will you help me set the table?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies. Will smiles and goes to a closet in his hallway. He takes out a box that doesn't look like it has ever been opened, and carries it to the dining room table. Inside is a set of plates, as well as knives and forks. They have a leaf pattern painted in red along the edges and the handles of the knives and forks bear the same design.

"These are lovely," Hannibal says, as Will retrieves four cloth placemats from a small cabinet in the corner of the room, the same red color, and places them – one at the head of the table, one at the right side and two on the left.

Will smiles, his cheeks darkening. "I've never had occasion to use them," he says, as Hannibal sets the plates and utensils down. Will takes coasters from the same cabinet, the same leather as the chairs in his office, and sets them at the corner of the placemats. He puts his whiskey glass on the setting to the right of the head of the table.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Where will I be sitting?" he asks.

Will smiles and nods to the head of the table. "Will, I couldn't possibly," Hannibal murmurs. "This is your home."

"No, it's *our* home," Will replies. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the same small black bag that had held his rings last night, drops them into his hand and places his on his finger, before handing Hannibal's to him. "If Tobias thinks you are the Ripper, you can't be seen in a subordinate's place."

Hannibal blinks, taking the ring and sliding it on. Strange, his hand feels better with the golden band on it than it did without. Will pockets the black bag again.

"The more time I spend with you, the more interesting your worldview becomes to me," Hannibal murmurs.

Will blushes, taking the box and carrying it back to the hallway. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should; it was meant as one," Hannibal says mildly. Will returns to the dining room, his eyes on the table setting with something like anticipation.

Will bites his lower lip, shifting his weight, and then he runs a hand through his hair. "What should we serve to drink?" he asks, heading into the kitchen. Hannibal follows.

"What kinds of wine do you have?" he asks.

"Um…red," Will replies blandly. He leads Hannibal past the kitchen, into a small cubby area with a startling amount of box meals, cans of soup, and bags of coffee. Hannibal has yet to see any greens or fresh food except the bread. There are three bottles of red wine sitting on the floor, covered with more dust than Hannibal cares to examine.

"We can't serve red wine with poultry," Hannibal says.

Will nods. "You can take my card," he says. "Buy whatever you think is best."

Hannibal blinks at him when Will reaches into his pocket, takes out his wallet, and hands Hannibal a credit card. He takes it on autopilot, and frowns. "I couldn't possibly," he says.

"Please," Will says, smiling. "You bought the champagne last night."

"Yes, but -."

"I would never do your food the disservice of pairing it with the wrong drink," Will adds, closing the cubby door and returning to the kitchen. "And Tobias would notice, if he's as refined as he would have us believe. I really must insist, Agent Lecter."

"I'd like you to come with me, then," Hannibal says. "I don't like the thought of leaving you here."

Will smiles, and steps forward, resting a hand on Hannibal's arm. "Your concern for me is appreciated," he says, and Hannibal has to wonder if it even is concern at this point. It feels fiercer than that. "But unwarranted. Tobias and Franklyn shouldn't be here for another hour at least, and I highly doubt I'll be attacked on sight. I'll be alright."

Hannibal swallows. He wants to argue, but Will's tone offers no room for it. He subsides with another sigh, and nods, and Will smiles, his eyes flashing in playful victory. "There's a 'Total Wine' a few miles away," he says, steering Hannibal towards the door. Hannibal pockets his credit card and takes his coat from the hanger.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he tells Will, and Will smiles, indulgent and amused.

"Take your time," he says, and opens the door for Hannibal, resting his hand on the edge of it. "I'll be here when you get back."

Hannibal swallows back his protest, and leaves. He is somewhat glad to hear the sound of the door locking behind him.

By the time Hannibal returns, it is dark outside, and he has trouble finding a parking space as everyone has returned to their homes for the night. The line at the store had been insufferable, and it has been almost an hour since Hannibal left. He won't admit that he's worried, but the idea of Will being unguarded with a murderer on his scent is not a pleasant one. Especially now that he knows Will is less than attentive when it comes to intruders in his house.

Hannibal goes to the door, bag with the wine in hand, and tests the handle. It opens, and Hannibal frowns, because he knows Will locked the door. He opens it, shrugging of his coat and pocketing his keys.

"Will?" he calls, clearing his throat.

Will comes into view at the end of the hallway, and Hannibal lets out a breath that he won't admit was relieved. Will looks relaxed enough, and he comes forward to help Hannibal with his coat, hanging it up. "Tobias is here," he murmurs. "He didn't bring Franklyn."

Hannibal frowns. "How long has he been here for?" he demands. Without Franklyn to act as a buffer, Tobias could have done an unforgiveable amount of harm to Will while Hannibal was gone.

"A few minutes, no more," Will replies, smiling at him. "He's eager to see you."

"I'm sure," Hannibal says quietly. He allows Will to lead the way into the kitchen, seeing Tobias at the window, looking out to the back yard. His hands are folded behind him like a security officer waiting for a fight to break out.

Tobias turns, and his face splits into a wide smile. "Good evening," he says, his low voice warm and welcoming.

"Hello, Tobias," Hannibal says. He hands the bottle of wine to Will and steps forward, shaking Tobias' hand. "So glad you could make it. Are we expecting Franklyn?"

"Just me, I'm afraid," Tobias replies, releasing Hannibal's hand. Will opens the bottle of wine and pours the three of them a glass each. "He called me earlier – apparently he had a bad reaction to come cheese and is feeling unwell."

Will huffs a laugh. "Franklyn is quite fond of cheese," he says, handing Tobias his glass first, then one to Hannibal.

"I can't say that's something he and I share," Tobias says mildly. He swirls the wine in his glass and takes a deep breath in, before taking a sip. He hums in appreciation. "They say opposites attract."

Will smiles, cordial and fine, and leans against the kitchen countertop. "Only when those opposites are complimentary, I think," he replies. Tobias regards him with a raised eyebrow. "Someone to finish your food, and someone to not only reveal your weakness, but cover for and overcome them on your behalf."

Tobias smiles, lifting his glass as though toasting to that. "How long have you two been married?" he asks.

"Oh, not long," Will replies.

"Just last year," Hannibal adds. "But Will and I have known each other far longer."

Will looks at him, a fond smile on his face, and Hannibal takes his place at Will's side, leaning against the counter as he does. He takes a drink of wine. "So," Tobias murmurs, "would you say you know each other well?"

"I'd say that," Hannibal says with a nod.

Tobias' smile widens. "Interesting," he says coolly, taking a sip of wine. "I can't imagine what it must be like."

"To be married?" Will asks.

"To know and love a man who, until recently, was married to someone else."

Hannibal feels Will go tense behind him, and reaches out, settling a hand between Will's shoulders. Will swallows, taking another sip of his wine. He is doing a very bad job of looking calm. "Sometimes there are…obstacles," Hannibal says mildly. "But when it comes to love, I'm not a man to allow himself to be held back by anyone else."

"Oh, I imagine not," Tobias says with a wide smile. "Sometimes obstacles are easy to be rid of."

Hannibal hums, rubbing his hand down Will's back in an effort to calm him down. So, Tobias reads *TattleCrime*. Of course he does – he is the kind of man to do research on his 'friends'. Hannibal can salvage this, *maybe*, if Will maintains his decorum.

Will sucks in a tight breath, forcing himself to smile. "So, Tobias," he says, his voice soft, "how long have you been a patron of the arts?"

"Since I was a boy," Tobias replies, taking another drink. He sighs, leaning back, one hand on the countertop as he sucks in a breath through his teeth and swallows. "There is a nuance, a subtlety, to classical music that I find invigorating. Like the composer is letting me in on a secret."

"I imagine you enjoy knowing secrets," Will says. His shoulders loosen, and Hannibal gives him a smile, pulling his hand away.

"Oh, I do," Tobias says, smiling. "But I also enjoy keeping mine to myself."

"Will and I tell each other everything," Hannibal says.

"Everything?" Tobias repeats, tilting his head to one side. His eyes go to Will once more, sharp and assessing.

Hannibal smiles, more confident now at the calculating look in Tobias' eyes. Will meets them steadily, challenging, and Tobias presses his lips together, nodding to himself. "I can see you're both interesting people," he says coolly.

"We try," Will replies. "Would you like to go with me to the dining room? I'm starving."

"Of course," Tobias says, and Will nods, leading the way into the other room. Hannibal pulls out the aspic and turns it over onto a serving plate, pleased when he sees that the stock has gelled nicely. He takes a large slicing knife and a fork and carries the plate into the room. Tobias is sitting at the left side of the table, Will on the right, and Hannibal places the dish in the center.

"This looks interesting," Tobias notes. "What is it?"

"Aspic," Hannibal replies. "Chicken and turkey."

He slices off three large servings and portions each out, before taking his seat.

Tobias hums, taking a bite and washing it down with wine. "I love this choice," he says, raising his glass. "French?"

"Linden," Hannibal replies with a smile. "The Virginian wine revolution is upon us."

Tobias smiles, and Will takes a bite of his own meal. The saltiness of the stock is a wonderful counterpart to the sweet wine Hannibal bought. They eat in silence for a long moment, before Will sighs and sets his fork down. "I apologize for being so blunt, Tobias, but given our new friendship, I feel I should ask – did you kill that trombonist?"

Hannibal blinks, surprised at Will's bluntness.

Tobias smiles. "Do you really have to ask?"

"The murder is being investigated by the FBI," Will replies. His eyes flash to Hannibal, and Hannibal gives a short shake of his head. It's not enough to count as a confession. "They're going to find you."

Tobias shrugs. "Let them."

"You want to be caught?" Hannibal asks, frowning.

"They can try," Tobias says with another shrug. "They already sent you to question me, just because I own a string shop, but they won't find anything there. And I'm sure I can count on your testimony that you found nothing of note in my shop."

Will smiles. Hannibal must give him credit; after the initial shock, he is playing his part rather well. "Of course," Will purrs, taking a sip of wine. "But I have to advise you against being so cavalier. If you draw too much attention to yourself, the FBI may start looking at your friends."

"Meaning you two?" Tobias asks. Will smiles.

"You're reckless, Tobias," Hannibal murmurs.

"I must ask, how did you come to the conclusion that I killed the trombonist?"

"Simple deduction," Hannibal replies. "Sometimes a mystery just isn't that mysterious."

"Well, if the FBI send any more men to me, I'll kill them. And then I'll kill Franklyn. Then I can disappear."

Will huffs a laugh. "You could have attacked us, when we first met," he says. "Why didn't you?"

Tobias smiles. "It is so rare to come across people who see things the way I see them," he says, and nods to Hannibal. "I was going to kill you."

"Of course you were," Hannibal replies mildly. "I'm lean. Lean animals yield the toughest gut."

Tobias smiles. "You're not wrong."

"I'm so glad you accepted our dinner invitation, Tobias," Will says brightly. He lifts his glass. "I can't wait to see what you come up with next."

Tobias smiles, and clinks their glasses together.

"Jack, we've found the man who murdered the trombonist. It's Tobias Budge. He confessed to me this evening. Be careful when you go to arrest him – he's dangerous and said he would be willing to attack any agent who came to get him."

Hannibal ends his voicemail to Jack and looks up as Will carries in the leftover dishes, setting them by the sink. He sighs. "Well, that went…pretty okay," he says mildly.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "I just called Jack. I'm sure he'll be arresting Tobias tomorrow."

"Good," Will says, rubbing his hands over his face. He sighs.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal asks.

"Just…it's nothing," Will replies, shaking his head. He offers Hannibal a small smile.

"Will," Hannibal says, pocketing his phone and stepping closer to Will. He reaches out and touches Will's shoulder, turning him to face Hannibal fully. "You can tell me."

"It's stupid," Will replies, shaking his head again. "I'm just…concerned."

"Concerned," Hannibal repeats. "About what?"

Will sighs, his eyes flashing to the door leading to the hallway. "Some of the things he said troubled me," Will murmurs. "I'm worried about Franklyn. Tobias doesn't seem the type to make idle threats."

"No," Hannibal says. "He doesn't."

"I -." Will stops, biting his lower lip. He looks up and meets Hannibal's eyes and Hannibal drops his hand, too conscious of how close they're standing. Will sighs, looking away again. "I know it's stupid, and it's paranoid, but -."

He stops, hesitating, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Ask, Will," he says.

"Would you mind staying the night?" Will asks. Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "I'll feel better once he's arrested, but he knows where I live now."

"Of course," Hannibal says, and he is somewhat surprised by how eagerly he replies. "I can stay. I don't mind."

Will's eyes flash to him, wide and relieved. "Thank you," he murmurs. "I know it's silly, but -."

"Will, I told you before, I value your safety and comfort very highly," Hannibal says. He rests his hand on Will's shoulder again, squeezing gently, pleased when Will's cheeks darken, and he drops his gaze. "Tobias will be in custody tomorrow, and until then, I have no problem staying with you if it will make you more comfortable."

"Thank you," Will says again. "You're a good friend, Agent Lecter."

Hannibal smiles.

"Let me show you the guest bedroom."

That night, Hannibal carefully opens the bedroom door, peering out into the hallway. There are no lights on, but Hannibal knows Will is as much of a night owl as he is, so he must tread carefully. He uses the light on his phone to navigate the hallway and the stairs, and then goes to Will's dining room.

He takes down the book full of notes on Randall.

The name on the front is similarly coded, but Hannibal knows it's him – the book has two swooping symbols at the end that look like backwards number fours, and Hannibal smiles, taking a picture of it with his phone. He opens the first page and photographs it, and the next, until he has almost twenty screenshots of Will's coded writing.

It should be enough to figure out the pattern.

He returns the book to the shelf, re-checks the locks on the front door, and returns to his room.

Chapter 9

Will doesn't ask for the ring back, and so it sits on the bedside table in his guest room, gleaming in the lamplight. Hannibal finds his gaze often going to it, idly picturing in his head what kind of man Randall must have been, to have so captured and kept Will's attention. He imagines Randall is young, closer to Will's age than his own. He would have dark eyes, and a smile that lit up a room, to hide the predator crawling under his skin and so that he could bare his teeth without arousing suspicion.

He spends the first hour with his notebook and his phone, taking the letters of Randall's name and applying them to the other pictographs. It's apparent right away that even with the coded letters, Will is not writing his notes in English. He copies down the letters that he can identify easily – the 'R's, the 'A's, 'N's, 'D's, and 'L's. From there, he attempts to figure out the rest of the words. The fact that is it not in English is another obstacle, for he cannot look at a three-letter word, see no 'A', and assume it's a 'The'.

But Hannibal knows many languages, and the art of learning another is never one that has proven difficult for him. The letters 'AN' appear often, some in short words, some in long. Hannibal sighs, rubbing his hand over his face, his eyes getting tired after the food and wine and low light as he continues to work.

It's like being given a glimpse at the world's most intricate and engaging puzzle. He is determined to figure out Will's code, for through it he can truly know what Will has observed and thought about him. It is a matter of survival and ego; if Will is as talented as Jack claims him to be, and as sharp-eyed as Hannibal himself has seen, it could prove inconvenient to further their friendship or attachment.

Hannibal manages to identify the 'S'. Will uses it after an apostrophe when combined with Randall's name. He smiles, adding it to the rest of his transcription, and blinks down at his page.

There is one word. AL--RN-S. It is the most complete one he has found so far. He tilts his head to one side and flips to a new page, tapping his pen against the side of his notebook as he thinks over what the other letters might mean.

"A, L, T…?" He writes it down, and then smiles. "Alternus."

Latin.

His smile widens, and he applies the letters 'T', 'E', and 'U' to the rest of the transcript, humming in delight when more words start to form. Hannibal had studied Latin for years in Paris, and though much of his memory has faded, his grasp of Italian and French is providing wonders in aiding him in translation.

He has the first page almost completely translated when he hears a floorboard creak. He frowns, setting down his notepad and phone, and sits up straighter in his bed. Will's home is old enough to move with the change in temperature and the actions of those within it, but

even still, it sounded deliberate, like a footstep. And not one coming from the direction of Will's bedroom.

Hannibal rises, reaching for his gun on the bedside table. He hears another footstep, and growls under his breath. He hadn't heard Will rising from his bed or crossing the hallway and down the stairs. Which means there is someone else in the house.

He turns off his light and creeps to the door, opening it silently. He prowls out to the landing, his gun aimed to the floor below. He can see a flashlight, roving around, the shadow of a tall, dark man.

He smiles and lowers his gun. "Hello, Tobias."

The flashlight rears up, illuminating Hannibal's face. He winces and raises his hand to shield his gaze from it, blinking in the abrupt light. "What has you coming here at such a late hour?"

Tobias' warm laugh is familiar, and Hannibal lowers his hand as the flashlight beam moves to his feet. "Loose ends," he replies, and walks up the stairs with little sound. Hannibal presses his lips together and moves out of the way so that Tobias has room to stand with him on equal ground.

"Franklyn?" he asks.

"Dealt with," Tobias replies. His smile is broad and Hannibal answers in kind.

"That's a shame," he murmurs.

"Is it?"

"I know Will was very fond of him."

"Yes," Tobias murmurs. "And where is your dear husband?"

Hannibal huffs. "You and I both know that Will and I are not married," he replies coolly. Tobias tilts his head to one side. "His bedroom is behind you."

Tobias blinks, and turns to look at Will's closed bedroom door at the end of the hallway. "You're a surprising man," he says lowly, keeping his voice at a whisper. "Why are you greeting me so casually, when you made it clear we are not to be friends?"

"An obligatory remark," Hannibal replies with a smile. "But I think both our problems would end if something were to happen to Will."

Tobias frowns. "Are you not investigating me also?" he asks.

"I have done my best to maneuver this world with the intention of keeping people blind to my actions," Hannibal says. "But yours have moved me. I want to see you compose more great pieces. I cannot do that with the FBI breathing down my back. So, if the agent of that investigation were to be removed…"

"Again, you surprise me," Tobias says mildly. "What's to stop me from killing you after I have disposed of your dear Will?"

"My attachment to him is a matter of showmanship," Hannibal says. "And," he adds, lifting his weapon, "I have a gun. Unless you have one as well, I doubt you could best me."

"So, you want me to do your dirty work for you," Tobias murmurs.

"Will's friendship threatens to be inconvenient," Hannibal says. "An obstacle I would see removed. I ask you to do what I cannot, as a gesture of friendship. I imagine you could create a lovely instrument out of his neck."

Tobias hums, and then smiles, showing his teeth. "You'd best return to your room, then," he says. "I'd hate to implicate you."

"I appreciate it," Hannibal says. "Call me when it's done, and I shall help you dispose of the body."

"Much obliged," Tobias replies, and turns, his flashlight illuminating the way to Will's bedroom. Hannibal returns to his room, shutting the door behind him.

For a while, Hannibal hears nothing. It is a worrying amount of time, but he forces himself not to rise and investigate himself. If Tobias kills Will, Hannibal will kill him in 'self-defense', and not only will the most dangerous friend be dealt with, but the investigation on Tobias will close and Hannibal will be free to do as he pleases once more.

And if Will should survive, well, that kind of traumatic experience is sure to break a man like him. Hannibal has a plan, as he always does.

He busies himself with translating more of the notes on Randall, pleased as he adds more letters to the collection of knowns, until he is confident enough that he would be able to interpret any of Will's notes – which, should Will fall tonight, will be open for investigation at his leisure.

The sound of glass shattering startles him, and he sighs. Trust a Goddamn musician to do something silently. Of course, he shouldn't be surprised – Tobias is a man of song and sound. He wouldn't be able to do anything in silence.

He rises, grabbing his gun again, and rushes to Will's bedroom. The door is slightly open, and Hannibal pushes it all the way, stuttering to a halt at what he sees inside.

Will is standing over Tobias' body, a shard of what looks like a mug from his nightstand gripped tightly. His knuckles are bruised and bloodied, his chest and legs covered with blood. Tobias is on the floor, wide-eyed, a weighted cello string clutched in his hands and blood gushing from an open wound in his throat. There's a mark from the string around Will's neck, etched with blood.

"Will," Hannibal says, and Will's head snaps up to him. He drops the piece of mug, his eyes wide.

Hannibal goes to him, placing his gun on a dresser as he steps inside, and cups Will's shaking hands. Will meets his gaze, frozen but trembling, and Hannibal looks to Tobias as the blood stops flowing, and he goes still and silent.

"What happened?"

"I -. He attacked me," Will says. "You didn't hear him come in?"

"No," Hannibal replies with a shake of his head. He presses his lips together. "He must have picked the lock."

"Oh *God*, what have I done?" Will whispers. There are no tears in his eyes, but the shock and pain linger in his voice, clogging his throat. His fingers curl between Hannibal's and then let go, smearing blood on Hannibal's skin. He puts his hands in his hair and steps back, to the other side of Tobias' body. "Oh my God."

"Will, it's alright," Hannibal says, reaching out to him.

"It's not alright!" Will hisses, glaring at Hannibal. "I just killed a man."

"A murderer who was intent on making you his next victim," Hannibal says, keeping his voice low and calming. He reaches out for Will again, pleased when his hand manages to find Will's shoulder without being flinched from. He turns Will and cups his face, the fresh blood smeared between them. Red is a lovely color on Will – it makes his eyes glow and his pale cheeks look almost delicate. "It was self-defense."

"It's still *murder,* Agent Lecter," Will says.

Hannibal presses his lips together. He must tread very carefully, here. The fact that Will is alive, that Will fought back and overcame a predator like Tobias – Hannibal is shocked at how pleased he is that Will stood victorious. He's relieved, almost, that Will survived, despite the complications that will follow because of it.

"Jack will assume he fled," Hannibal murmurs, making sure Will's eyes remain on him. "They will investigate his shop and name him as a murderer. There is nothing to implicate either of us."

Will blinks at him, his brow furrowing. "You're…what are you suggesting?"

"I'm offering my help," Hannibal says. "You are still needed, Will, to catch the Shrike's copycat and possibly the Ripper, if he has returned. I would not see you hindered with investigation on what I call a just killing."

Will shakes his head, stepping back and releasing himself from Hannibal's hands. "You're -. I -." He stops, running another hand through his hair, soaking it with blood. His eyes meet Hannibal's and hold there for a long, long time. Hannibal must be sure that Will sees things

his way; this is the knife-edged moment, where his and Will's fate could come crashing down cliffsides or ascend to something more intimately entwined than Hannibal could dream of.

"So we do nothing," Will breathes. "We don't tell Jack about this?"

"No," Hannibal replies, shaking his head. "I will help you clean your room and hide the body."

"Why?" Will demands. "Why would you offer such a thing? You're a man of the law."

"Because there is nothing more important than catching the Ripper," Hannibal replies fiercely. He steps forward and takes Will's hands again and Will doesn't fight him. "I can't do that without you, Will."

"The Ripper," Will says. "First you doubted he has returned, and now you claim that he needs to be found."

"Tobias was convinced enough to try and claim your life," Hannibal replies. "I know it's not in your nature, but this is in mine; self-preservation, Will. This is a matter of survival. If Tobias believed he made friends with the Ripper, who else might he have told? What other killers might come to claim the life of the man who would catch him?"

"We invited this man into my home," Will says sharply. "And he tried to kill me because *you* convinced him you were the Ripper. Now you're saying the Ripper might come for me, too?" He shakes his head. "I would be safer in police custody."

"You *are* safe, in my custody," Hannibal murmurs. Will's eyes flash to him, wide but dark. Hannibal would give the world to know what he's thinking in this moment. "We can hide the body," Hannibal says. "And with it, this disastrous night."

"Why are you doing this?" Will asks again. "Why would you help me?"

"Because…" Hannibal sighs, and pretends to think on his answer. "Because you are my friend, Will. And I would not see you harmed because of some evil man."

Will sucks in a shaky breath, his eyes dropping to Tobias' lifeless, staring eyes. His fingers curl and fall from Hannibal's hands, and he wipes his hand over his neck, wincing at the wound.

"You're injured," Hannibal murmurs. Will presses his lips together, nodding. "Let me see."

Will nods, tilting his head to one side to bare his neck, and Hannibal steps closer, carefully feeling along the edges of the cut. "Not deep," he murmurs with another wave of relief. "But noticeable. I would hide your neck until it heals."

"One more secret," Will whispers. He swallows tightly and meets Hannibal's eyes again. As close as they're standing, Hannibal can see the different shades of green and blue in Will's dark eyes, the cling of his chapped lower lip to his tongue when he licks it. He slides his hand to Will's hair, and pulls Will into a hug, breathing the scent of blood on his flesh in deeply and savoring it like the aftertaste of sweet wine.

Will embraces him in turn, his nails digging into Hannibal's back like he needs the support to stand. His hands tremble against Hannibal, his shoulders tense. "Shower and clean up," Hannibal tells him, noting how Will shivers at the sound of his voice. "I will take care of the body. And I will take care of you."

He feels Will nod, and closes his eyes as Will shudders again, his cheek pressed tight to Hannibal's shoulder, head turned away, so he can still see the body. Then, he withdraws, and manages a weak smile.

"Leave your bloody clothes out for me when you're done," Hannibal tells him, cupping his face. He looks lost, so terribly shaken. Hannibal likes him like this; as delicate and in need of care as a newborn fawn robbed of its mother.

"Thank you, Agent Lecter," Will says quietly, dropping his gaze.

"Go," Hannibal says, and parts from Will with one last touch to his neck. Will nods, and goes to his bathroom, shutting the door behind him. Hannibal gazes dispassionately at Tobias' body, and kneels down, shutting his eyes.

It appears he will not have to go hunting to restock for a while.

Hannibal wraps Tobias in a tarp from his car after washing his face and hands, careful to be sure that his coat covers the stain of blood from Will's touch, and deposits it in his trunk. He can only hope that he doesn't have to remain in Will's presence for too long, lest the meat spoil.

He returns to see that Will has piled his dirty clothes on the stain of blood and is wiping down his bathroom door and the wooden floors. Hannibal tuts, kneeling down beside him, and Will lifts his eyes, his expression unreadable.

"Will bleach do?" he asks.

Hannibal nods. "Air out your room when it's done," he says. He cups Will's face, noting that the line in his neck looks a lot better when robbed of so much blood. Will's knuckles still remain cracked and bleeding a little, and Hannibal can see the cut on his hand where the mug shard sliced his palm. "And bind your hand when you have the time."

"I might cut it off," Will replies, and turns his attention back to the stain on the floor.

Hannibal smiles. "I will dispose of the body," he says, and grabs Will's clothes, bundling them tightly into a thick wad. "I shall return tomorrow morning. Try not to do anything rash in my absence."

Will huffs, the sound strained. "I'll make an attempt," he mutters, and Hannibal smiles.

"Call me if you need anything," he replies, and leaves the room. He gathers his phone and his notes, pocketing them and going back to his car. He drives to his apartment and brings Tobias' body inside, thankful for the late hour, depositing it on his kitchen counter. Tobias was a strong specimen, his flesh thick and muscled, and will provide many good cuts of meat for Hannibal's meals.

He smiles, humming a tune to himself as he begins his work. He shall have to prepare a special 'Thank you' meal for Will, as a reward for all of his hard work and help to ensure Hannibal remains well-fed.

Chapter 10

Hannibal isn't sure what state he expects to find Will in when he drives up to Will's house on a Friday morning. It's been several days since the eventful dinner and subsequent night with Tobias, and while Will has been present in Hannibal's thoughts the entire time, his side has remained curiously absent of the man's shadow. There haven't been any more murders of Ripper-like note, and so Jack has not called Will and Hannibal to consult on anything. Hannibal had received a short debriefing telling him that it looked like Tobias had fled the state and there was an alert and warrant for his arrest, but nothing else.

If Will doesn't answer, or if something has happened to him, Hannibal may have to go create some of his own art just to force Will to interact with him again. It feels childish – Will would call it 'petulant' – like forcing a dog to learn a new trick not through reward, but through punishment.

Still, he's getting ahead of himself. Will might be sick, or he might be busy, or he might have simply deemed it unnecessary to reach out to Hannibal without the case being a factor.

Of course, he may have also reacted much worse to Tobias' death than Hannibal anticipated, but he's sure he would have been notified if Will had turned himself in, or been reported missing after harming himself or fleeing the state.

He walks up the three steps and knocks on Will's front door. He hears a shuffling inside, footsteps that are measured but slow, and then Will opens the door. He has his glasses on his face, his hair damp and dark like he's recently showered, clad in a bathrobe, t-shirt, and underwear.

He flushes when he sees Hannibal at the door and pulls his robe tight around himself. "Agent Lecter," he says, unable to meet Hannibal's gaze and instead fixing them somewhere around his neck. "This is a surprise."

Hannibal smiles, and lifts the container in his hand. "I brought breakfast."

Will's eyes flash up to his, barely for a second. He raises an eyebrow and presses his lips together, before he nods. "Thanks," he says, and steps back to allow Hannibal inside. "I'll, ah, go get dressed. You know where everything is."

Hannibal nods, and goes to the kitchen as he hears Will pad up the stairs and to his bedroom. He wonders if Will has trouble sleeping even more now – if he sleeps with the lights on or sets an alarm every hour so that he doesn't fall into REM sleep. If he has a gun or knife under his pillow.

He takes the two normal plates from a cabinet and two forks, carefully separating the egg and sausage bake he'd created from Tobias' gut. It's Will's kill, after all – he should be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor. By the time he's done, and has two glasses of water and has set the table for himself and Will, Will returns downstairs, dressed in the same t-shirt but with jeans now. Clearly he has nowhere to be today.

His hair is fluffier like he'd run a towel over his head for one last check, and he's not wearing his glasses anymore. The whole look is a soft and vulnerable one, somehow more intimate than when he'd opened the door in his underwear.

"Smells good," Will says. Hannibal places the plates at the head of the table and to the right. Will takes his seat at the right without hesitation or complaint. Hannibal smiles, and sits as well.

"A protein scramble," he says, taking his fork and pointing to each splash of color. "Sausage, egg, green peppers, and chilis. A modest offering."

"An offering," Will repeats, and takes a bite. He gives a soft hum of appreciation around the tines of his fork, and sets one elbow on the table, fixing Hannibal with a sharp look out of the corner of his eye. "People offer things for appeasement or in the hopes of gaining something in return."

Hannibal smiles.

"Which is it you intend, Agent Lecter?"

"I feel like I've failed you," Hannibal says. Will tilts his head to one side. "I failed to protect you, when I promised that I would. Through my actions, there is blood on your hands."

Will's eyes grow dark, a shadow passing over them, before he swallows and nods. "That's true," he replies slowly. "But I am not innocent in it. I encouraged Tobias to come to us. I deliberately sought him out and poked the bear. And I'm the one who killed him." Then, Will's eyes meet his again, and there is something decidedly strong in his demeanor. Hannibal can't exactly pinpoint it, whether it lies in the clench of his jaw, the steadiness of his hands, but this is clearly some detail that Will feels very strongly about; "We each have our own sins, Agent Lecter. It would be good for both of us not to put them on each other."

Hannibal watches him for a moment, before he nods, turning his attention back to his food. "I've been worried for you," he says.

Will huffs. "I'm fine," he replies.

"Are you?"

"Yes." Will pauses. "Although…"

Hannibal looks up again as Will sets his fork down, rubbing his hand over his mouth like he's wiping away grease. He sighs and presses his mouth to his palm, cheeks turning white around the pressure from his hand, and shakes his head, his eyes set but distant, on the shelves of notebooks about the Ripper.

Will straightens. "I think Franklyn might be dead," he says.

Hannibal nods. Tobias had told him as much. "Did he miss a session?"

"No," Will says. "After I noticed that his attachment to me was growing, I suggested we extend the time between our sessions to every two weeks. We're not meant to have another until Tuesday." He pauses, and swallows, looking to Hannibal again. "I can't report him missing."

Hannibal knows why, but he's curious if Will came to the same conclusion. He tilts his head to one side.

"There were witnesses, Hannibal," Will murmurs. "You and I were the last people seen speaking to both of them. Missus Komeda would confirm, and Freddie was at the damn Opera House that night. She might have asked the wrong people the wrong kinds of questions. She might…*suspect*."

"Even if she does suspect, there's nothing linking them to us after the Opera," Hannibal says. He reaches out and takes Will's hand gently, noting that the scabbing on his knuckles looks better. So, too, does the cut around his neck. It's faded dramatically to the point where his beard is hiding most of it and he might be able to pass off the more obvious nick marks as bad shaving attempts. "Where is Tobias' car?"

"I drove it to a chop shop in Annapolis," Will says. "Left it there in the middle of the night, walked ten blocks to the nearest bus station and got back home that way. I wore gloves, latex ones, and a windbreaker with a hood, and deleted the car's GPS history before I did it. Just in case."

Hannibal blinks, surprised and supremely pleased at Will's foresight. "Incredible," he breathes, and Will frowns at him. "That's…very clever of you, Will. Well done."

Will's eyes darken, anger this time crossing his face. He curls his fingers and yanks them away from Hannibal's with a low hiss. "Don't *congratulate* me," he says harshly, acid on his tongue. "These same thoughts and actions are what prevent me from seeing Franklyn be discovered, to give him proper justice. He lives all alone in a house without any neighbors, it could be *years* before anyone finds him, Agent Lecter, and I just have to sit and let him rot because I'm too busy covering my own ass!"

Hannibal presses his lips together, considering that. "We could visit his house," he says lightly, pulling his hand back and taking his fork again, eating another bite of the scramble. Will blinks at him. "If you're that concerned, a short visit will confirm your suspicions, and then we can report it. You could say you suspected Franklyn was suicidal or some such thing, which would warrant a visit from his psychiatrist independent of Tobias."

Will frowns, biting the side of his lower lip.

"Or better yet, put in an anonymous call to the police and say you saw a prowler there, or heard gunshots. Buy a burner phone and dispose of it; untraceable. That way the police get to figure it out and you're in the clear."

"You've thought about this," Will says, whisper-quiet.

Hannibal shrugs one shoulder. "It's my job to exhaust all possibilities within a situation," he replies. "I've had just as much time to think about recent events as you have."

Will shivers, his shoulders going abruptly lax. He rests his elbows on the table and picks up the fork, absently stabbing the tines through his food, hunched over his plate prison-style to hide his face from Hannibal's gaze.

"I don't know how you do it," he finally says, as Hannibal finishes with his plate and washes the last of the food down with water. Hannibal hums, setting his glass down, and meets Will's eyes. "It's all I can think about. I close my eyes and I see his shadow in the darkness there."

"Being attacked in one's own home is a traumatic experience," Hannibal says.

Will shakes his head, huffing a frustrated breath. "I had to do it," Will says. "It was him or me. Is that what it felt like, when you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs? You knew he wouldn't go quietly. He wanted suicide by police. Most killers like him do."

"Rationalization is a coping mechanism of a guilty conscience," Hannibal replies. "I don't feel guilty about killing Hobbs. He was a rabid dog. It was a mercy to put him down – not just for me, but for all the other girls whose lives have been indirectly spared."

Will's mouth twitches. "That sounds like rationalization."

"There is a difference between an action that is just and an action that is rational," Hannibal says. "It would have been rational to merely subdue Tobias, to stab him in the stomach or the leg, to knock him out with the mug instead of shattering it and killing him. Yet you chose to act on instinct, and like you said, it was him or you." Will presses his lips together, looking down.

"I don't feel guilty about killing him," he says. "It's not guilt. I don't know what it is."

"Does it upset you, to know that your instinct was to kill?"

"I'm pretty sure it says something about my character," Will replies curtly. He straightens up, folds his fingers under his chin, and meets Hannibal's eyes. They're steady, this time, assessing. "And your first instinct was to protect me. To hide the evidence away. Why?"

"I told you why."

Will smiles. It's the smile that bares the edges of his teeth. "Your first instinct is also to lie," he says. "A civilian would have immediately tried to deny themselves any culpability. You didn't hear him come in. You didn't know what was going on. But as soon as you did, you inserted yourself into the cleanup, you presented an argument that made you an accessory to murder."

Hannibal swallows, and Will's smile widens.

"Was that rationality, or justice?"

Hannibal sighs, sitting back in his chair, and meets Will's piercing gaze without flinching. "I'll confess, Will, that I find a lot of the emotions you conjure in me are not rational."

Will blinks at him, shoulders tensing. He clearly hadn't expected that answer. His cheeks turn pink and he bites his lower lip, looking down.

He sighs, lowering his hands, his fingers curling. Hannibal can see the cut on his palm, healed over and pink, splitting his otherwise pale skin. "You know, I've spoken with a lot of people who have violent thoughts," he says. Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "And you're not the first cop who killed on the job I've had to evaluate before going back into the field. You know what they always mention?"

Hannibal shakes his head when Will pauses.

"The eyes," Will says, swallowing harshly. He turns his hands and presses them flat to the table on either side of his plate. "It's always the eyes. The victim they couldn't save. The killer's eyes, so devoid of emotion or empathy."

"Do you see Tobias' eyes?" Hannibal whispers.

Will shakes his head. "No," he says. "All I can remember is his hands."

"His hands," Hannibal repeats with a curious tone.

Will nods, looking up at Hannibal again. "I've felt those hands," he says, whisper-quiet like giving a confession in a booth, head bowed so he doesn't have to look at the priest's face. But he meets Hannibal's gaze under the swoop of his hair, like he can't bear to take his gaze away. "When I held the trombone player by the throat, I felt Tobias' strength in my own touch. I felt the tremble of the victim's neck. I heard the music he played."

"Do you hear it now?"

"No," Will says. "Not anymore."

"And you feel that like a loss."

"Perhaps I've been spending too much time with the Ripper for company," Will murmurs, his fingers curling again. He sits back in his chair and takes his glass of water, swallowing a large mouthful with a loud gulp before setting it back down.

Hannibal doesn't quite know what to say to that.

"There are some schools of thought that assert there are physiological markers in psychopaths," Will adds. "Beyond the wiring of their brains. Enlarged foreheads, or a set to their eyes, stuff like that."

"You and I both know a killer could look like anyone," Hannibal replies mildly.

Will nods, and licks his lips. "I know."

Hannibal considers him for a long moment, looking over the dark circles under Will's eyes, the tired slant of his mouth, the tension in his neck. "I imagine it's been a long time since you felt like you could talk to anyone about stuff like this," he says. Will's eyes flash to him. "The things you see and hear, the people who sit in your patients' chair and fill your head with dark thoughts, there's no outlet for it. So it curdles in your mind, assaults your thoughts and your dreams."

"And it doesn't to you?" Will says, sharp and accusing.

Hannibal smiles. "I've been doing this for far too long to let it affect me now," he says. Will huffs. "That is not to say it shouldn't affect you, Will – your empathy and your humanity don't allow for anything else. It's not a fault."

Will nods, looking down at his hands again. "When I was with Randall," he begins, and Hannibal blinks at the abrupt change in conversation, shifting his weight in his seat, "there was a night. It was after I had begun to suspect him, before the third body showed up. We went to bed, and he touched me, and all I could think about was what his hands might have done when I was away. What they could do to me in that intimate moment in our bed."

"Were you afraid?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. "I was…angry," he says, like he's surprised at having finally found the most accurate word to describe his emotions. He huffs. "I was furious with him."

"Because he was hurting people?"

"No," Will replies, softly. "I was angry that he didn't feel he could tell me. That he was struggling. That he was getting sick again. I could have helped him, or found him help. I'd done it before. But he didn't tell me. He didn't want to share it with me." He presses his lips together, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. They're shining, like he's fighting back tears, but Hannibal cannot hear them in his voice. "How can you love someone and only show them a shadow of yourself?"

Hannibal's eyes fall to Will's knuckles, takes in the white, angry clench of them, the tension in his arms. "Did it ever cross your mind that, if you took care of him, you would be saving innocent lives?"

"I put my hand around his throat," Will says. He straightens up, rests one elbow on the table and holds his hand like he's cradling a brandy glass within it. "When he was asleep, after. I rested my hand at the base of his neck and thought about *squeezing*." His fingers curl, tightening like he's trying to hold a mouse in his palm. His nails touch the meat of his thumb and he sighs. "That's the first time I thought about leaving. Then the third body showed up and I knew I had to."

"Because you were afraid of what you would do, if you didn't."

Will pauses, swallows, nods. "His hands felt like Tobias'," he says. "I felt the same heat in his touch as I did in Randall's. Killers run hot. Their passion burns them like a fire."

He goes still for a moment, and then swallows, lowering his hands. He takes his fork and starts to eat again, like he's trying to cover up how low and dark his voice had gotten when he said it. Hannibal smiles widely, his chest feeling tight and hot for a reason he can't quite explain.

"There's only one person you can really tell these things to," Hannibal murmurs after a moment of silence – tense, but companionable. Will pauses, looking at him. "Does the Ripper know about these thoughts?"

Will swallows his mouthful, and nods. "The version of him that my mind conjures, at least," he says. "He's easy to talk to. Like you are."

Hannibal's smile widens. It's possible, then, that the journals Will keeps on the Ripper will betray more of this curious new facet of his mind. Hannibal is all the more ravenous for a chance to see his notes and translate them, so that he can know what exactly Will and the Ripper talk about.

When Will is finished with his food, he pushes the plate away and washes it down with the rest of his water. Hannibal watches him do it, and then Will's eyes meet his, a mix of trepidation and challenge warring for dominance on his face.

"You fascinate me, Will," Hannibal says. He's not sure he meant to give the words a voice, but he is pleased all the same when Will's cheeks turn pink and his head ducks down.

"I try not to be boring," he replies, voice hoarse.

Hannibal smiles. "I want you to know that you can always talk to me," he says, and Will blinks, turning his gaze to Hannibal once again. "If you find my company half as comforting as the Ripper's." Will smiles, off-kilter and sheepish, and bites his lower lip. "You have trusted me with a great deal of information."

"Like I said, you're easy to talk to," Will replies.

"And for that, I am supremely glad," Hannibal murmurs. He reaches out and takes Will's hand again, and Will's fingers curl around his hand, not squeezing but seeking the most contact it can. "It is important to have someone to share dark thoughts with, lest they consume us and drive us mad."

"Do you have any dark thoughts, Agent Lecter?"

Hannibal smiles. "I suppose, to some, they might be," he replies. "But if I might repeat myself from the first time we met; it's easier to move in the darkness. One hardly ever feels shame there." Will nods, sighing. "I encourage you to embrace the same mindset. Thoughts are just thoughts, aren't they?"

At that, Will manages a more genuine smile, and squeezes Hannibal's hand. "You're right," he says, and sighs, shaking his head. "Are you sure you weren't a psychiatrist in your previous life?"

"Maybe," Hannibal replies. "Profiling and behavioral analysis is much like what you do. The point is not, however, to cure, but to identify and catch."

Will looks at him, and tilts his head to one side. He pulls his hand away and rests his elbow on the table, his chin in his hand, and smiles at Hannibal. "Indulge me, then," he says. "How would you identify and catch the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Hannibal laughs. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter 11

"The Ripper began his slew of killings over three years ago," Will says, pulling out the photographs of the first sounder and pinning them to the corkboard. The board is half cork, half whiteboard for notes. He affixes the autopsy reports and the lead detective's report aside each one. "The cooling off period has been decreasing, but the execution of the murders has held to the same level of brutality."

Hannibal nods, watching as Will puts up the second set of murders, then the third. They're in the FBI university building, in the corner of one of Will's lecture halls. There aren't any scheduled lectures for the day, given that it's a Saturday, so he knows they won't be interrupted by any students or faculty.

Will steps back, looking up at his board, and then turns to face Hannibal. "He has to have some kind of surgical know-how," he says. "There's no learning curve for his kills. No hesitation."

"You compared his victims to pigs," Hannibal says, leaning against the desk and folding his arms across his chest, his eyes still on the board. Will joins him and mimics his posture. On the desk is the file for the copycat murder, which Hannibal knows now he will not convince Will was anything but another of the Ripper's designs, as well as other suspected case studies that Hannibal doesn't remember seeing. Clearly Will has been doing his research.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "The attacks were remote, the bodies discarded like garbage," he says without inflection. "Suggests an organized killer. He's patient. He waits for the right time to hunt. But I can't figure out how he's choosing them."

"If you're correct, perhaps the randomness is by design," Hannibal suggests. Of course, he knows that that's not the case – each of these people are guilty of their own sins in one way or another. Personal slights that his pride couldn't let go of.

Will frowns, and turns to meet Hannibal's eyes. "So, he's deliberately choosing people that don't matter to him?" he asks. Then he shakes his head and looks back to the board. "I don't believe that."

"Did he tell you as much?" Hannibal asks with a smile.

Will huffs, his jaw clenching, but he doesn't rise to Hannibal's bait.

"Hunters like this take their time," Will says. "They choose a target, and stalk that target for however long is necessary to make the attack. Just because it isn't personal doesn't mean it's random. It's too sophisticated for a 'Wrong place, wrong time' victimology.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "An insurance salesman," he says, "a dentist. An FBI trainee, a mechanic. Professional people."

Will rubs a hand over his mouth and stands up. He goes to the board and moves Miriam Lass' file across to the other side of the board. She doesn't have a crime scene photo – just the one of her smiling, which would have been taken from her personnel file. "I don't think Lass counts," he says.

"Why is that?"

"We never found her body," Will replies. "Technically she's still classified as a missing person. There's always a body, Agent Lecter."

"Serial killers like this often devolve," Hannibal says. "Perhaps he consumed her in her entirety."

Will pauses, and turns to look at Hannibal. His eyes are dark, assessing, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "What is it?"

"…Consuming them," he says. He looks back at the board, fingers tracing over the line of flesh of the girl Hannibal mounted on the stag's head. "Of course." His voice is soft, breathy. "I assumed he was harvesting them as trophies, or maybe selling them on the black market. What if that's why he felt such a connection to Garrett Jacob Hobbs?" He looks back at Hannibal, a pleased smile on his face that shows his teeth. "What if he's eating the organs he takes?"

Hannibal blinks, mentally cursing himself for the slip of the tongue. It's too easy to speak to Will – he should know better. Will takes note of everything he hears, and sees, documents interactions that aren't even real. Anything, no matter how small, triggers a reaction.

"A cannibal," Hannibal says quietly, and Will nods, looking back at the board.

"Livers, lungs, heats, kidneys…intestines. These are all things we eat from animals," he says. His eyes are bright, his entire demeanor changes from thoughtful distance to a frantic excitement. It's lovely to watch, even though Hannibal doesn't like how he got there. "He hunts them and slaughters them like pigs."

Hannibal swallows. "A cannibalistic mindset is one deeply disturbed," he says. Will turns to meet his eyes. "Does the execution of these murders seem like that kind of chaotic?"

"Disturbed doesn't always mean chaotic," Will replies. He goes back to the desk, turning and leaning against the edge next to Hannibal. "But it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies, because he can't argue that. On any other day, he would be impressed with Will's deduction.

"Maybe that's why there aren't other bodies," Will continues, clearly invigorated by his most recent conclusion. "You can make a meal out of almost any part of a human. Even the bones."

That fact, Hannibal knows intimately.

"He has to be older," Will adds. "Mid to late forties. This kind of evolution takes time to practice and hone."

"Or he started young," Hannibal replies.

Will looks at him again, pressing his lips together. "Maybe," he says, and looks back to the board. He stands, grabs a marker, and starts to write down the age, the locations, and underneath it, 'Cannibal', in all capitals.

Then, he pulls back, frowning at the board. Hannibal stands and goes to his side. "What is it?" he asks, seeing the furrow in Will's brow, the unsure sink of his teeth into his lower lip.

"The Ripper is charming," he says. "And intelligent. He has to be, otherwise he would have been caught sooner. There's no reason for him to hunt – he can just call his prey to him."

"Granted, I can only speak from my own experience as a cop and detective, but sometimes the chase is part of the satisfaction."

Will looks at him, his frown turning into a fond smile. "Do you like the chase, Agent Lecter?"

Hannibal smiles back. "Being given a body and having to backtrack to the killer is like a puzzle. An opportunity to prove the superior strength of the justice system." He looks back at the board, eyes running over the bodies. They feel like old memories – fond ones, but old. He feels hungry, looking at them.

"The strength of the system, or your own?" Will replies. His voice is soft, tone teasing, but Hannibal feels tense all the same. "This is your land. Your house. Killers that come into it are to be dealt with and put away. Does it make you feel good, when you find them and bring them down?"

"I'd argue it would feel good to anyone with a moral compass."

Will hums, his eyes dropping to Hannibal's neck. "You carry around the icon of Saint Michael," he says. Hannibal's fingers curl so that he doesn't reach for the totem. "He is the ultimate deliverer of justice, the patron Saint of the police. Do you feel like you carry out his righteousness, with every case you close?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies, "but I told you; my career and my view of the world was largely shaped by the tragedy in my youth."

"I know," Will says, solemn. He reaches out, resting his hand on Hannibal's shoulder in a brief, gentle touch. When he pulls his hand away, Hannibal's shoulder clings to his warmth and it spreads into his chest. He wonders, if he took Will's temperature, there would be a significant rise, now that he's a killer too. He swallows and looks back at the board.

"If the Ripper is a cannibal, he won't stop hunting until he's caught," he says.

Will nods. He sighs, and checks his watch. "I have to go," he says, and Hannibal blinks at him when Will straightens up. "I have a session in a little less than an hour and I need to get to my office."

"On a Saturday?" Hannibal asks, curious.

"Yeah. Only time this patient is free, unfortunately," Will replies with a shrug. He looks at the board and, after a moment, goes to it, flipping it over to the clean side. "Do you think the files will be safe here?"

"I can take them with me," Hannibal replies. "If Jack asks, I'll just say we're doing our job."

Which is true. Will smiles. "Thank you."

Hannibal gathers the files and walks with Will out of the lecture hall, closing the door behind them. He matches Will's stride as they leave the building and head over to the parking lot, where both their cars are parked as they'd agreed to meet here from separate locations.

"I suppose I'll hear the same answer, but I wanted to ask if you'd allow me to read your notes on the Ripper. Translated, of course. Just because your conversations are fictional doesn't mean there isn't something important in there – something only a fresh set of eyes would be able to see."

Will frowns, biting his lower lip, his shoulders tense as he looks down at his shoes. "I don't know," he says, eyes darting to one side. Hannibal understands – there isn't just things about the Ripper in those journals. It is also Will's deepest thoughts, the intimate conversations he is only comfortable sharing with a product of his own imagination. "There's a lot to translate."

Hannibal smiles, and takes a step forward. Will lifts his head, meeting Hannibal's eyes. His expression is guarded, his throat working as he swallows. Hannibal wants to soothe him, wants to coax him into giving away all of his secrets – it will be a lot easier if Will gives him everything willingly, rather than Hannibal having to take it away by force.

He cups Will's cheek and Will shivers, his cheeks turning pink as he presses his lips together and goes tense. Hannibal can't tell if the discomfort he sees in Will's eyes is because he is fighting against the affectionate touch, or because he wants it. Hannibal is good at reading people, and he'd have to be blind not to see how eagerly Will lights up whenever he dishes out praise, or how gently he touches Hannibal when Hannibal holds his hand.

"Think about it," he says, quiet and soft. Will nods, swallowing again harshly, and Hannibal takes his hand away. "I won't force you to do anything, Will, but I think you know I'm right."

Will clears his throat and rubs at the side of his neck. He's pinned against the side of his car, but not retreating. He meets Hannibal's eyes and gives him a single, short nod. Hannibal smiles and takes a step back.

"Will you be home tonight?" he asks.

Hannibal nods. "You were my only appointment today," he says.

Will's cheeks darken, and his mouth twitches like he's fighting the urge to smile. "Alright. I'll let you know when I'm done with my patients, and I'll come over with the translations. I'll let you know when I'm on my way."

"I look forward to it," Hannibal replies. He takes a step back, allowing Will room to open his door, and watches him get inside. He doesn't miss how Will releases a breath when the door closes, his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel.

He smiles. "Oh," he says, and knocks on the window. Will rolls it down. "I was wondering if I could come by your home, and pick up the cooking utensils I brought."

"Oh, right," Will replies. He looks down at his car keys, and after a second of hesitation, unhooks one and hands it to Hannibal. "I don't have a spare. I'll pick it back up tonight. I washed everything – just take what you need."

It's so easy, it's almost comical. Will is remarkably trusting. Then again, he has no reason not to be. "Thank you," Hannibal says, and Will nods, rolling his windows back up and pulling out of his space. Hannibal watches him drive away, pockets the key, and hurries back into the lecture hall. He turns the board and takes all the file information down, wiping the board clean with an eraser. If Will asks, he'll blame it on another lecture.

He goes to his car and drives to Will's house in Baltimore. He has a good hour where he won't be interrupted. He takes his dishes first, pleased to see that Will handwashed them and didn't damage them in a dishwasher, and loads them into his car.

Then, he goes to Will's study. The books on the Ripper are as he last saw them, and he takes the first one out, recognizing the double 'P' on the front cover, the two 'R's on either end of the title. He smiles, opens the book to the first page, and sees that it's dated three years ago, just after the first sounder was found and reported.

Given that time frame, it's no surprise that Will managed to fill in so many notebooks. The conversations he has shared with Will over their brief time together alone could fill a book, in his mind.

He takes out his phone and photographs the notes, then replaces it and takes down the second book. Will has used the standard books, seventy pages each, and written on them on the front and back. It's an enormous endeavor, and Hannibal doesn't have all the time in the world. He photographs the first two books, puts them back on the shelves, and leaves Will's house with a wide smile on his face.

He drives to his apartment and carries the cookware inside, setting them down on his kitchen counter. Then, after a moment, he goes to the modest library he has in his living room. The top shelf is full of well-worn textbooks on anatomy and psychology, and he takes them down and carries them to his bedroom. If Will has his eyes set on someone with medical know-how, Hannibal can't make it too easy for him.

He has a set of cutlets from Tobias' thigh in his fridge, and takes them out, setting them on the counter. He debates cooking his heart, or his kidneys, but decides against it. Will is too freshly entrenched in his knowledge that the Ripper consumes his kills. With that kind of mindset, it would be too easy for him to start suspecting anything that Hannibal might put in front of him.

He had been foolish, to use the word 'consume' in regards to Miriam Lass. Will makes him irrational, impatient. When it comes to the man, Hannibal finds himself constantly battling the careful control he has spent so long cultivating. Will had said killers run hot, that their passion reflects in their temperature. A poetic, altogether romanticized observation, but Hannibal won't argue it. Not when every time he touches Will he feels warm.

He does a final sweep of his apartment, making sure there is nothing too obvious within it, from his choice of literature to an out-of-place stain. Of course, Hannibal keeps his home meticulously clean, and he could explain away the lack of warmth in it as an accurate consequence of his line of work, but again, he must make sure he doesn't make it too easy for Will. Will's sharp eyes see everything, his ears pick up any change of tone, any stray word that could be taken too many different ways. Hannibal will have to be very careful when Will brings his translations over.

Knowing he has a bit of time, he takes out one of his own notebooks and begins to transcribe Will's notes on the Ripper. He translates them directly into Latin, consulting his page of the pictographic alphabet Will uses as he does so. He leaves a line free under each set of notes so that he can rewrite them into English when he has more time.

It's a time-consuming task, but Hannibal enjoys it, even when his hand starts to cramp and the hunger in his stomach from a delayed lunch starts to gnaw at him. He'll admit, he hasn't felt this excited, nor this strange surge of anticipation, for quite some time. Unravelling Will's observations about the killer he has befriended promises to be a delightfully diverting task – just as entertaining as escorting him to the Opera, making him blush, exerting control over him by placing him in Hannibal's care and command.

He receives a text from Will just past four in the afternoon, telling him that he's on his way. Hannibal smiles, and stands, packing away the half-full notebook and his alphabet page and hiding them in his bedroom. Then, he goes to the kitchen, where Tobias' thigh pieces have defrosted nicely. He'll bread and fry them, he decides, and pair them with asparagus and olives, with white wine.

When Will arrives, he has a thick leather-bound journal in his hand, and Hannibal smiles when he recognizes one of the bottles of red wine he saw in Will's pantry in his other hand. "Hi," Will says warmly, and Hannibal steps to one side to allow him in. Will's eyes rake over the living room, note the open plan that leads to the dining room, the patio doors that reveals the modest, communal backyard, the arch of the doorway that leads to the kitchen.

He hands Hannibal the bottle and takes a breath, smelling the food. "Made enough for two?" he asks, gentle and smiling.

Hannibal returns it, settling his hand on Will's shoulder and squeezing once. "Of course," he replies, and leads the way into the kitchen. He puts the bottle of red by the fridge and opens the door, retrieving the white he had intended to pair with the food.

"Smells delicious," Will says, as Hannibal takes the fried meat out of its pan and starts to set their plates. "I don't think I'll ever be able to look at Mac'n'Cheese again. You're spoiling me."

"I believe in the power of positive energy," Hannibal replies with a smile. "It's easy to have a good day when you're well fed."

Will huffs, biting his lower lip. "What're we having?" he asks, approaching the counter when Hannibal hands him a glass of wine.

"Beef cutlets, fried with oregano and parmesan, with asparagus and Kalamata olives."

Will gives another appreciative hum, inhaling deeply as Hannibal takes the plates, sets one on his forearm, and grabs his glass of wine. "Shall we?"

Will nods, and walks to the dining room, settling down on the left side while Hannibal sits at the head of the table. How easily patterns and habits begin to form. Hannibal sets the plates and wine down, and returns to the kitchen to take the bottle and two sets of silverware, returning them to the table.

Will takes his first bite eagerly, his eyes closing in appreciation as he chews and swallows. "Seriously," he says, once his mouth is free, "you should have given thought to becoming a professional chef."

Hannibal laughs, spearing an olive with his fork and eating it before he answers; "If you would believe it, the culinary field is more cut-throat than being a policeman, or working for the FBI, in places."

"Is that so?" Will asks, taking a sip of wine. His journal sits on the table on his other side, and Hannibal nods.

"Not a lot of people want to be shot at for thirty grand a year," he replies. "And not everyone has such a well-honed sense of right and wrong. For every person who becomes an Agent, there are four more who fail for one reason or another."

"I've conducted my share of psych evals," Will replies. "I know the statistics."

Hannibal smiles. "Well then, let me thank you for your involvement in making sure we only get the good eggs."

Will huffs, rolling his eyes. "It's not perfect," he replies. "Some get through – either they're smarter than their evaluators, or they know how to answer the questions, or they get the questions right, but the psychologist misses something."

"How so?"

"It's…little things," Will says, his expression softening into something thoughtful and sad. "We want to see the best in the world, and in its people. We project. Things fall through the cracks when that happens."

"Have you ever projected onto someone who shouldn't have passed the exam?" Hannibal asks, curious.

"Not that I know of," Will replies. "But unfortunately, that's the kind of thing you don't realize until it's too late."

Hannibal smiles, and turns his attention back to his food. Oh, poor Will. "I understand completely."

Chapter 12

"When I first began to envision the Ripper, he looked like me," Will says, three glasses of wine in. They've started on the bottle he brought over, and Hannibal looks up from his translations with a raised eyebrow.

Will's cheeks are a lovely pink, medium-rare steak, his eyelids heavy, but his eyes are still sharp when they meet Hannibal's. The food has been cleared away and so they sit at Hannibal's modest table, nothing but Will's journal and their wine glasses between them. His mouth is wet with wine and his own tongue. Hannibal gets the impression that he keeps drinking for something to do while Hannibal reads.

Will's handwriting when not in pictographs is slanted, rushed. He writes with purpose and is not gentle with the paper. It speaks to a predisposition towards aggression. And yet, when he writes certain words, his hand abruptly gentles. The 'R's and 'P's in the Ripper's name are written softly, the 'I' dotted like the brush of fingertips down a lover's cheek.

Hannibal smiles, and looks back down at the paper. "For comfort's sake?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "I think it was just easier, at first," he says. "But as I got to know him, he changed."

"How so?"

"He got darker," Will says. His eyes are glassy with alcohol, and they leave Hannibal when Hannibal looks up, fix on the kitchen counter where the first empty wine bottle is. "Monstrous. He grew claws, and sharp teeth."

He doesn't say it with revulsion, or fear. Rather, Hannibal imagines his expression is the same that men wore when facing their old gods. There's awe in the corners of his mouth, something longing in the way he curls his fingers around the stem of his wine glass.

"I'm sure Freud would have a lot to say about that," Hannibal says lightly, drawing Will's eyes again. He smiles. "You literally pictured yourself becoming this monster as you got to know him."

Will presses his lips together, something like shame making him lower his eyes. "Is that so strange? To seek connection? I want to understand him."

"I can tell," Hannibal replies, nodding down to the journal. He turns a page, already several deep in the translations Will gave him. There are other things folded into the pages, clippings of newspaper articles regarding previous murders – not the same that were on the wall and the whiteboard, but others. Suspected additions. Hannibal recognizes a few of them from his own hand, but they were older, across jurisdictions and state lines, so he doubts police have made the connection. And they never will if he has his way.

Will's cheeks darken, he bites his lower lip and takes another drink of wine. "I'm not crazy, Agent Lecter," he says, defensively. Hannibal blinks at him.

"I never said you were," he replies mildly. "Will, you must understand – I am not coming at this from a perspective that wants to do you harm."

Will doesn't answer. He sighs, rubbing a hand over his mouth, and rests his elbows on the table, fixing Hannibal with another look. "We are not blitz hunters, Agent Lecter," he says calmly, steadily. "We evolved for the chase – the dogged pursuit of animals that simply cannot outlast us."

Hannibal smiles. "Do you believe the Ripper is your prey, in this scenario?"

Will sighs again. "No," he replies. "I don't think he's anyone's prey. Even yours."

"I don't think he considers himself to be prey at all," Hannibal replies coolly. "But I would also argue, the way you write about him here, he's not a predator either. He's…other."

"You know the color blue has been found to promote feelings of trust and sanctuary in people?" Will asks. Hannibal blinks, tilting his head to one side, but allows the sudden change of conversation topic. "People who wear blue are usually considered to be more trustworthy, more honest. And blue is the color of the daytime – it's when we feel the safest. When the bigger predators can't hurt us."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and nods.

"So, what does it mean when you're not a predator, or prey?" Will continues. He swallows and rubs his thumb at the corner of his mouth. "You're just…other?"

"To continue with the metaphor, I suppose that means you see the world as black and white. And between it, grey."

Will smiles. It's his off-kilter, toothy one. The alcohol flush has started to spread down his neck, touching the edges of Tobias' string cut.

"It would be easy to see the world as such," he murmurs. "But I don't agree. I think he sees the world in technicolor. Vibrant, and beautiful."

Hannibal swallows, and lowers his eyes to the journal. His fingers brush over one of Will's caressing notes on the Ripper, and he can see how Will's hand softens even as his script turns more slanting, letters crawling together until they're little more than peaks and troughs with lines and dots to mark each letter.

"Do you see his murders as beautiful, Will?" he breathes.

"Murder is the ugliest thing in the world," Will bites out, his cutting tone sudden. It sounds like he's repeated this to himself many times before.

Hannibal smiles. "Your words and your writing contradict each other," he murmurs.

Will swallows, and takes another drink of wine. Hannibal mimics him, swallows down the tart flavor of blackberries. The wine is very dark, like blood in the moonlight – almost black.

He lets out a quiet hum. "Do you think, if Abigail Hobbs survived, you would want to speak to her?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies. "I killed her father."

"Oh, so he's a man now. A father. Not a rabid dog."

"We are all capable of being many things at once."

Will hums. "But the bloodline was impure," he says. "Her mother, a lost sheep that was attacked by the dog meant to protect her. She's a mutt, mixed blood, and had the strain of a killer in her. He fed her his meat, conditioned her to love and trust him."

"The lambs trust the sheepdog and the shepherd, where there are wolves to fear."

Will smiles. "How old was your sister, when you lost her?"

"Younger than Abigail was," Hannibal says coolly. "Much younger."

Will's smile widens, showing his teeth again. His eyes are bright like the fox waiting for the rabbit to lope closer, to come close enough for his teeth to snap and kill. "The Ripper felt a connection to Hobbs," he says. "Consuming one's kills, Hobbs did it out of honor, out of love. The Ripper doesn't love his victims, but he wants to honor them all the same." He pauses, and lets go of his wine glass. "How did your sister die?"

Hannibal presses his lips together. "I thought you didn't want our friendship based on tragedy," he says.

"I consider us friends," Will says quietly. "You know a lot about me, now. And I want to know about you." He waits for another heartbeat, and then looks away. "You don't have to tell me."

"I know," Hannibal replies. He sits back in his chair with a sigh, and shakes his head. "Maybe one day."

Will smiles, soft and genteel. His psychiatrist smile. Hannibal much prefers the other one.

"Do you think she helped her father?" Will asks, quiet and far away. "That she knew what he was doing, and helped befriend those girls? That she saw the predatory light in her father's eyes and decided she wouldn't be prey – just one more time, one more kill, it would sate his hunger, and keep her alive?"

"I think she must have," Hannibal says. "But she's dead."

"I would have liked to speak to her," Will says. He looks away. "It's so rare for a man to love someone so deeply."

"You say he loved her. Do you think it's possible?"

"To love someone, and want to kill them at the same time?" Will asks, tilting his head to one side. He rests on his hand like his neck can't hold the weight of his skull, slant-eyed on Hannibal's face like his leaning script. "Absolutely."

Hannibal smiles. "If the Ripper was sitting in front of you right now, not as an extension of your psyche, but a flesh and blood man, would you want to hurt him?"

"No," Will says. He answers quickly, with a finality that Hannibal finds surprising. His mouth flattens, lips pressed tight, words swallowed back.

Hannibal's smile widens, and he drops his gaze back to the journal. "What does the Ripper look like, now, to you?" he asks.

"He's becoming a man again," Will says. "Dark-eyed. Charming. He comes cloaked in blue."

"Does he make you feel safe, Will?" Hannibal asks.

"If he wanted to hurt me, there's nothing I could do to stop him," Will replies. "I find comfort in that."

"Oh?"

"It's not quite inevitability," Will says, lifting his head and sitting back in his chair as Hannibal is. His fingers wrap around the edge the table, slide out like he's memorizing the knots and grain marks in the wood, come to a stop on the corners and turn white-knuckled. "Solace, more like."

"How do you mean?"

"If the Ripper ever came for me – not that I think he would. I'm no threat to him, and with my diet I hardly think I'm palatable – but if he did, then I would get to see his face before I died. I would get to know who he was."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Tobias might have succeeded in killing you," he says. Will's jaw clenches and his eyes darken. "Randall, too. Forgive me, but it sounds like you won't let anyone kill you unless it was the Ripper."

"I'm not a sacrificial lamb, Agent Lecter," Will says quietly.

Hannibal smiles. His fingers curl around the edge of the journal, and he closes it. Will's eyes flash to the motion.

Hannibal regards him for a long moment, notes the tension in his shoulders, the flex of his neck when he swallows. He hasn't shaved, relying on his beard to hide the marks of Tobias' string until he's healed over. He's hiding, a rattlesnake in the undergrowth, rattling its tail to warn whatever's coming for it that it intends to strike.

"How long have you been in love, Will?" he murmurs.

Will's eyes flash. His fingers curl too tight, nails digging into the side of the table. He straightens, forces himself to go lax, and angles his jaw to hide his neck. He reaches up and runs a hand through his hair, making it fall forward over his forehead in an attempt to hide his eyes.

"I'm not in love," Will says. "I haven't loved Randall since the day I left."

Hannibal's smile widens. "Come now," he says warmly. "You know what I mean."

"Do I?" Will snaps, challenging.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. Calm. Controlled. He is enjoying himself, he'll admit. Will is turning into the most fascinating of playthings.

Will swallows, tries to meet Hannibal's eyes. Can't. He looks down at his journal and reaches for it and Hannibal lets him take it, watches as his hands curl protectively around the edges like there are still secrets in there to be withheld.

Hannibal looks forward to reading the real notes. Even though Will's translations prove to be accurate, and he doesn't think Will is hiding anything in them, he knows there is so much more to discover. Later books will have much more intimate conversations, confessions, thoughts that Will dare not give away even to Hannibal.

Will clenches his jaw again. "I'm not in love with the Ripper, Agent Lecter," he says, defensive and tight.

Hannibal smiles, and wonders which book he will translate that marks Will as a liar. "Of course not," he replies smoothly, pleased when Will's shoulders lose their tension and he finally meets Hannibal's eyes. "That would be insane."

Will clears his throat, ducks his gaze, and nods. Once, sharply. "Right."

Will leaves shortly after, taking his journal with him. Hannibal bids him a good afternoon, closes and locks his apartment door, and watches Will get in his car and drive away from his vantage point by the front window.

Then, he goes to his bedroom and retrieves the beginnings of his own translations.

Translating from pictographs to Latin to English is a time-consuming endeavor, but Hannibal is elated and full of energy. He completes the notes from the images on his phone and fills three notebooks after allowing a line after each for his translation to English. Then, he sets about with the final puzzle piece.

Will's grasp of Latin is capable, like he studied it extensively for some time and then went for a while without using it, the same way people might lose their mother tongue after too long surrounded by Americans. He also writes the words with the sentence structure of the English

language – namely, that the verbs are not always the last in the sentence, and he makes use of conjugations and ownership instead of the classic Latin phrasing and terminology. It at once makes the process easier and more difficult, as Hannibal has to keep stopping himself from arranging the sentences the wrong way.

But he manages.

It starts after the first group of killings.

"When I ask him why, he smiles and laughs. Why is not important. Why this man, that woman. He's lying to me. I don't know why he's lying. Why he feels he has to. I call it murder. He calls it art.

He asks me about Randall. I never talk to him about Randall. He doesn't need to know. But he's relentless – persistent. Driven. He would make a good lawman."

Hannibal gets a phone call at eleven at night. It's Jack. "Good evening," he greets.

"I need you out here," Jack says, gruff and demanding as always. Hannibal swallows back a sigh and nods, though Jack cannot see it. "I'll send you the address."

"I'll be there as soon as possible," Hannibal replies.

"Good," Jack says. Then, like an afterthought; "Don't call Will."

Hannibal frowns. "Why?"

"You'll see."

Although Hannibal was given no information as to the owner or the victim within the residence, he finds himself realizing as he drives up to the collection of police cruisers, the M.E. truck, and FBI vehicles, that he is undoubtedly at the house of Franklyn Froideveaux.

He parks behind the yellow tape and ducks under, receiving a nod of recognition from the policeman on site. He also sees Freddie Lounds amidst the group of reporters and he meets her eyes, finds her purse-lipped and cold when she looks at him. He swallows back the instinctive urge to growl at her.

It makes sense why Jack didn't ask Will to come.

He ascends the long, sloping driveway on the hill. A house on a hill, no neighbors as Will had said. The house is large and fine, the kind of place Hannibal would one day like to live in, with stone columns on the front carved into the shapes of satyrs in playful chase. The windows are tall and arching like an old banquet hall, and when he goes inside, he passes through thick wooden doors and into a foyer floored with marble.

He spies Jack and walks over to him.

Jack nods in greeting, his lips pressed together. There is no one else around. "Hello, Jack," he greets.

Jack nods again, his eyes on Hannibal's shoulder like he expects Will to jump out from behind him. After a beat of silence, he sighs. "Sorry to call you out so late," he says with no genuine hint of apology. Jack has never cared about the hour before, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "I need your eyes."

Hannibal nods, and follows Jack past the foyer to the dining room. The lights are on, a fire once-burning died down to mere embers in the hearth. The walls are dark and lined with old books that look untouched and pristine save for the fine layer of dust.

Franklyn is at the end of the table, in front of a plate of half-finished food. His eyes are wide, blood coating his chest and stomach from a wire cut around his neck. Garroted. Hannibal presses his lips together and sighs, thinking that Will had been right; Tobias killed him.

Jack stops beside him, and Hannibal turns to look at the other man. "Any signs of forced entry?" he asks.

Jack shakes his head. "Our victim had wine delivered to his home. The delivery man saw the door standing open, called it in," he says. He nods to the other end of the table, where a similar meal sits, untouched. "We have fingerprints that link us to Tobias Budge – your suspect for the Opera House murder."

"Perhaps they knew each other," Hannibal suggests.

Jack huffs. "Hannibal, I'm going to ask you this once, and I expect an honest answer," he says, and turns to look Hannibal in the eye. Hannibal meets his gaze steadily. "Is there anything I should know about, or that you think I'll find, when I investigate this?"

Hannibal smiles. "You read *TattleCrime*."

"Don't deflect," Jack snaps. "Just answer."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and sighs. "No," he replies. "Will and I interviewed Tobias, and then we went to the Opera the next night. I'll admit, we encountered Tobias and Franklyn there, but aside from some friendly conversation, there was no additional engagement." He looks back at the body. "Will had nothing to do with this."

"I didn't ask if he did," Jack says, eyes narrowed.

"I believe in the power of pre-empting questions, Jack," Hannibal says lightly. "I know that's your next thought."

"Do you think he has an alibi?"

Hannibal shrugs. "What was the time of death?" he asks.

"M.E. put it around four days ago. The night after you and Will went to the Opera."

"Oh, that's easy then," Hannibal says with a smile. "I was with Will that evening. We were working on the Ripper case, under your orders."

Jack looks at him a moment longer, before he nods. "There's something else," he says. Hannibal raises his eyebrows and approaches Franklyn's body with Jack. Jack reaches out with a gloved hand and tilts Franklyn forward so that his face collapses onto his half-finished plate.

"Done post-mortem," he says.

Hannibal blinks, his mouth going dry. Franklyn's back has been entirely shredded, from neck to the small of his back. There are claw marks deep enough to reveal his ribs and, underneath, the grey shine of his lungs and the hot-red gleam of his rib meat.

He frowns, leaning in closer. "There are bite marks, here," he says, pointing to the nape of his neck where his spine is exposed. Jack nods, giving an uncomfortable hum. "Did someone… try to eat him?"

"Looks like," Jack says gruffly. "But there were no organs taken."

"So not the Ripper," Hannibal says, straightening. "I'm inclined to agree. The Ripper is brutal, yes, but this kill lacks his normal level of skill and savagery. The death was quick in comparison."

"Any ideas as to who would have done this?" Jack says. "Budge isn't a savage."

Hannibal presses his lips together, humming in thought. The claw marks are too wide to be an animal, and there are smaller, shallower lines towards the spine that look like thumbs. He circles the back of the chair and leans over it, careful not to touch the body, and spreads his hands out, mimicking the lines of claws.

"There were murders like this, last year," Hannibal says. He looks at Jack. "Three bodies, all ripped to shreds to mimic an animal attack."

Jack raises an eyebrow. "That so," he says. It's not a question.

Hannibal nods. "Doctor Graham told me about them," he replies. "He was the surgeon on call when they were brought in. None of them made it."

Jack's other eyebrow joins the first. "Really," he says flatly. "That's…interesting."

Hannibal smiles. "We never caught the killer," he says. "He just disappeared."

"I'm not letting another one slip through our fingers, Hannibal," Jack says darkly. "If he's back, we're going to catch him."

Hannibal thinks of Will, and Randall, and wonders what would have prompted him to return and devour Franklyn like this. He's sure this is Randall's work – the level of savagery is the same. Animals bite the necks of their kills to rob them of blood and snap their necks. Tobias did the heavy lifting for him, leaving Randall with the carcass to do with as he saw fit.

Then, he frowns, a troubling thought occurring to him; if Randall is back, it's only a matter of time before he finds Will again. He may do something drastic.

He's not sure what to call the emotion that rises up at that thought; it's not worry. Will is capable of taking care of himself, provided he pays attention when a monster prowls into his home.

No, it's not worry. Not even protectiveness.

A flicker of shadow passes behind his eyes, and he realizes.

It's possessiveness. Another predator is trying to mark his territory, but Will is the Ripper's. Will is *his*, to devour as he pleases.

He swallows a growl, and straightens. "I'll find him, Jack," he says, low and assured. Jack sighs through his nose and nods. "There will be DNA on the body, if he used his mouth. The kills from last year won't have been ruled as homicides, so we can't tie them together, but if Will knows anything, I'll find out."

"Good," Jack says. He hesitates, and then rests a hand on Hannibal's shoulder. "Tread carefully, Hannibal," he adds, with the tone of a worried father but the sternness of an order. "Don't get too close to this. If Will has anything to do with it, we will have to bring him in."

"Will didn't," Hannibal replies. He's sure of that.

"You've been blind before," Jack says, and lets go. "Don't let your feelings cloud your judgement again."

Hannibal nods sharply, fighting the urge to argue further. "I'll go right now," he says.

"Good," Jack replies. "I expect a report first thing, and I'll rush the DNA samples. If he's anywhere, we'll find him."

Chapter 13

It's very late when Hannibal returns to his apartment. He resists the urge to rush straight over to Will's house – he's likely asleep, and wouldn't appreciate Hannibal banging down his door and interrogating him as to Randall's whereabouts, or informing him that Franklyn is, in fact, dead.

He wonders if Will knows. If he'll read about Franklyn's death on *TattleCrime* and come to the same conclusions Hannibal did. If he'll be afraid.

Hannibal sighs, sitting at his table again, his eyes on his notebook where Will's translations sit. He's abruptly very tired, in a way he seldom lets himself get. Sleep is important, and Hannibal has never required much, but it's not sleep his body craves – merely rest. He wants to lie down and close his eyes and let the quiet of his blessedly thick apartment walls lull him into calmness and clarity.

He opens the notebook, reading over what he has managed to translate so far. It's not terribly interesting, really, as Will hasn't gotten to the meat of his conversations with the Ripper. Most of it is about cases, which Hannibal already knows back to front.

They interviewed Tobias the day after the cello man murder. From there, another day passed before the Opera, and one more before the dinner with Tobias. That's the day that the article Freddie Lounds wrote about them made it to the news, and the day that Franklyn died. It's been several days since then, since Will killed Tobias and Hannibal disposed of the body. Randall would have had time to come to Baltimore, to find Will. To watch him.

His fingers curl and he stifles a low growl, unable to stop the swell of that same fierce, possessive need in his gut. He stands by his observations, though they were denied – Will is in love with the Ripper, and through that love, would not let himself be killed by anyone else. It's a strange devotion, one Hannibal has rarely seen, and he likes it.

He wonders what Will would do if he knew who the Ripper was. What he'd do when he figured it out.

If, he reminds himself. He shouldn't be entertaining these kinds of thoughts. It is still imperative to his livelihood and his nature to remain hidden, and to not get caught. Everything ends when he's caught – he would have to leave, and sever all ties like he did in Italy.

He wonders if Will would chase him.

The idea makes him smile.

Dawn arrives bright and early, before seven in the morning, and Hannibal has filled those hours with rest and sleep. He gathers his notebooks and stores them in his bedroom, not wanting to have to do so if he finds himself in Will's company again, at his house.

Then, he waits another hour, dresses and feeds himself, ready to rush to Will's side when he delivers the news that his patient is dead, and that Randall is most likely the one who mutilated his body post-mortem.

He goes back to his dining room table and calls Will.

"Hello?"

"Will," Hannibal begins. "You might have already read about this. Franklyn is dead."

There's a pause at the other end of the line. Then, Will says softly; "I'm sorry, I'm not interested in any work on my house."

Hannibal frowns, and though it's a needless urge, he checks the caller ID. But that is definitely Will on the other end of the line – Hannibal would know his voice anywhere. He sounds calm. Very calm, in fact. And while the fact that he is awake so early is not a strange occurrence in and of itself, Hannibal called him at his house phone, which means he's home. He would expect Will, in his sleepless hours, to be at his psychiatric office.

And his response had nothing to do with what Hannibal said. Meaning he's not alone.

He clears his throat. "He's there, isn't he?" he asks.

Will doesn't answer, but the dial tone doesn't sound, and Hannibal can hear his breathing on the other end of the line. Hannibal bristles, his fingers curling. Randall is there – Randall is within striking distance of Will.

"Can you get out of there?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the authority to say one way or the other, but the homeowner isn't available to take a call right now."

Hannibal swallows, and eyes the clock. Randall could have arrived at any time after Will went home yesterday. He could have been lying in wait for him. That's over twelve uninterrupted hours – God, he could have done all sorts of terrible things to Will, and Hannibal had been *sleeping*.

It feels like an injury to his pride. He's the King of his land, and unbeknownst to him, a robber crept in in the middle of the night and threatened his home and hearth.

"I'll be there in half an hour," Hannibal promises.

Will sighs on the other end of the phone, and his voice turns falsely chipper. "Yes, thank you. Sorry for wasting your time. Have a good day!" And he hangs up. Hannibal rises immediately, dons his coat and makes sure he has his keys, phone, and wallet, before he heads towards the door.

He pauses at the threshold, and grabs his gun before leaving. He can and has killed men with his bare hands, but Will's house has weapons and he cannot afford to go into a fight empty-handed when his opponent will not promise the same.

As he goes to his car, Jack calls him.

"Good morning, Jack."

"Hannibal," Jack greets. "Video surveillance came back from Franklyn's gate camera. Budge's car went in and out within the hour, but there's a second car on the video. We can't get a face from it, just a partial. I've sent it to your email."

Hannibal nods, climbing into his car. "I'm on my way to Will's house right now. I'll be able to ask him about the man he suspected killed those people last year."

"Good," Jack replies. "We didn't get a DNA hit on the saliva yet, but the lab's rushing it. I'll let you know what we find."

Hannibal nods, and hangs up the phone. He starts his car and drives over to Will's house.

There is a car there that doesn't fit with the fancy vehicles in the lot in front of Will's home. It's an old teal station wagon, muddied, with Wisconsin plates. Hannibal smiles – lazy. Then again, Randall doesn't exactly fit the profile of an organized killer. He's reckless, animalistic, and Hannibal doesn't think he would harm Will as long as he's placated, a tiger well-fed. But that will change, Hannibal knows it will, the second he walks in the door. If Randall came back because he thought Will's attentions had strayed elsewhere, then he'll know Hannibal's face as well.

Hannibal gets out of his car and goes to the door, trying the handle with a light touch, too light to make much noise. Of course, *now* is when Will practices locking his doors. He sighs, and looks around the house. There are several windows on the ground floor, and Hannibal knows there is a porch leading to the back garden. He will try those doors first – people tend not to remember those entrances, figuring their garden gives them enough safety and warning.

He prowls around the edge of the house, keeping low when he comes across a window. He reaches the window to the dining room and finds the curtains closed, and straightens, pressing his lips together. The porch leads to the kitchen, and from there, the dining room. A small distance, one easily overcome, but if Randall is on the wrong side of the table, that puts Will between him and Hannibal, and he could grab Will and threaten his life in order to get Hannibal to leave.

He presses himself close to the stone wall, takes his gun from his holster, and reaches out to test the door. It slides in an inch without sound, and he smiles, pushing it open the rest of the way. He can hear murmured conversation and, when he leans in, he sees Will's shoulder. His

back is turned to the kitchen, and there's a hand on his shoulder, the rest of the other person's body out of line of sight.

Hannibal comes in and closes the porch door behind him. He stalks silently to the other side of the wall and presses his back to it, head tilted to one side to listen;

"You could come with me." It's not Will's voice, so Hannibal assumes it's Randall's. He's young-sounding, well-spoken.

He tilts his head around the door and sees Will hasn't moved, but the hand on his shoulder has white knuckles.

Will looks to the side of him, his jaw clenched, and his eyes hidden behind his fluffy hair. Hannibal takes a deep breath, smells coffee and dampness like he's taken a shower. Hannibal wonders when Randall showed up – was it just this morning, with an offering of donuts and coffee and a plea to be let inside? Did he spend the night?

His fingers clench on his gun and he stifles a possessive surge in his chest.

There's another entrance to the kitchen, from the hallway. If Hannibal goes that way, he'll have a clear line of sight to Randall from there, and Will would be able to get away and back into the kitchen so he's not in danger.

"I can't go with you," Will says tightly. "Not after what you did."

Randall pauses, and Hannibal makes his way out of the kitchen and into the hallway. "I would never hurt you," he says. Hannibal makes it to the hallway, growling in frustration when he sees the door is closed. He can't get in that way without drawing attention to himself.

But the door is quiet, and this is the best way to make sure Will is safe. He has to *try*.

He lowers his gun and presses his fingertips to the door, gently pushing so it swings open. He catches the handle before the door can hit the back wall. He meets Will's eyes first, and Will sighs, shakes his head and turns his face to the table, sitting forward and running his fingers through his hair so that Randall doesn't notice his eyes have strayed.

Randall's back is turned to him, and his elbow is on the table. His hair is short and dark brown, he looks skinnier than Hannibal imagined him. Will seems like the kind of man who needs his partners to be strong.

"You killed three people, Randall," Will says tightly. "I can't ignore that."

Randall lets out a soft, angry noise, and shakes Will's shoulder. "How can you say that?" he demands. Will looks at him, then drops his eyes. "After all those journals and letters you wrote about the Ripper. I heard you calling out for him in your *sleep*."

Will flinches, biting his lower lip. "I didn't," he says, and Hannibal wonders whether that's for Hannibal's benefit or not.

"You loved that killer," Randall says. "Why can't you love me?"

"Randall, I -."

"Randall Tier," Hannibal says, and Randall jumps, turning in his seat. Will rises immediately and backs away, uses the chair at the head of the table as a shield. He's clean-shaven, now, and the cut of Tobias' wire has an imprint of a bruise in the shape of Randall's hand. The circles under his eyes are very dark, his mouth tight.

Randall looks…unassuming. Of course, Hannibal knows killers come in all shapes and sizes, but he honestly never would have pegged this young man for the type.

Until Randall's eyes flash in recognition, and darken, and Hannibal sees the predator crawling behind his irises. He stands, and Hannibal raises his gun, aiming for his chest. "You," he snarls, his fingers curling like claws. He leans towards Hannibal, not even caring for the gun aimed at his chest, a rabid dog in fight mode and his eyes on Hannibal's neck.

"I don't want to shoot you, Randall," Hannibal says calmly. "But I must ask you to come with me."

"This is *my home*!" Randall shouts. "You come in here like you own the place, put your hands on *my mate* -?"

"Mate?" Will says, high-pitched and shaking. "For God's *sake*, Randall, you're not a fucking *animal*."

Randall looks at him, his eyes wide. The anger returns as quickly as it had fled, and he bares his teeth at Will. "You're *mine*," he says. "I'll be damned if I lose you to anyone."

Hannibal closes the door behind him and steps further into the room. Randall could lunge at him, as close as he's standing. Randall whirls on him and growls.

"He's not yours anymore," Hannibal says calmly. Randall's lip twitches, revealing his teeth, which look to have been sharpened at the canines – probably with a file. Well, he's certainly dedicated, Hannibal will give him that.

Will isn't moving to the kitchen. Hannibal isn't sure he can, and if he tells Will to, Randall will whirl on him and attack him, and he might get hurt. The bruising around his throat incites Hannibal, the same way someone might dismiss a meal he created, or run into his car. It's rude, and offends his pride.

He has to keep Randall's attention on him.

"He's mine," Hannibal says, and Randall snarls again, his eyes wide and dark and fixed wholly on Hannibal once more. "He's in love with me now, Randall."

Hannibal doesn't look over at Will, but he hears his sharp intake of breath. Randall straightens, his eyes wide, and he looks at Will.

"Is that…" He clears his throat, flexes his claws. "Is that true?"

Will presses his lips together, in the corner of Hannibal's eye, and nods.

Randall snarls, the sound broken and angry, and runs at Hannibal. Hannibal sighs, flips his gun until he's holding the muzzle, and brings the handle down on Randall's temple, sending him to his knees. Randall falls with a heavy thud, groaning, but pushes himself up and barrels into Hannibal's hips, sending them both to the floor. It knocks the breath out of him.

Hannibal growls when Randall's hands wrap around his throat, tightening with all his might. Hannibal fights to control his breathing, to remain calm, and grabs his gun but Randall bites his hand, forces him to let go, and Hannibal has to get his hands on Randall's to save his neck.

Then, Will appears over Randall's shoulder. He wraps a strong arm around Randall's neck and puts his other hand to Randall's hair. Hannibal can't see his eyes, they're closed, and Will grits his teeth, tries to haul Randall off. Hannibal's vision starts to blur, his lungs denied oxygen.

Will obviously can't haul Randall's weight off of Hannibal, though Hannibal is sure he's trying to. Randall's thumb sits under his larynx, tight and burning hot – killers do run hot, apparently – and Will lets out a quiet grunt, his teeth at Randall's ear.

"Let him go."

"No," Randall hisses, rasping behind Will's forearm. Will tightens his hold.

Will lets out another sound, and Hannibal isn't sure what the emotion is behind it. It's getting hard to see, and hear, and Randall bears his sharp teeth and lunges down, trying to get at Hannibal's throat.

Perhaps it's resignation, he thinks – the emotion on Will's face. He hears a sharp snap, and Randall's face and hands abruptly go lax. Will hauls him off and deposits him unceremoniously against the back of the door.

Hannibal sits up, rubbing his hand over his throat, and watches Will's face. There's a curious lack of emotion there – stone-cold, like Will is looking at something dirty and altogether unremarkable.

He turns his head, and holds his hand out for Hannibal to take. Hannibal grips his forearm and lets Will haul him to his feet.

"For a cop, you're pretty bad at hand-to-hand," Will says. Hannibal wonders if there will be bruising on his throat to match Will's imprint.

"For a psychiatrist, you're very adept at murder," Hannibal replies.

Will's eyes flash, and he looks back at Randall's. His eyes are open and staring at the spot Hannibal had just been occupying. "He…wanted to be with me again," he says quietly, shivering. Hannibal presses his lips together and rests a hand on Will's shoulder.

"He found Franklyn's body," Hannibal says. "There were post-mortem injuries that reminded me of his work."

Will nods. "When did they find him?"

"Last night."

"Makes sense," Will says, quiet and withdrawn. "There was…blood on his hands. His mouth. He told me he could hunt for me, provide for me. That I'd never want for anything." He looks at Hannibal again.

"When did he arrive?" Hannibal murmurs.

"Last night," Will replies, swallowing. He winces, rubbing at his neck. "I made him shower, I tried to make him leave, but he wouldn't. I…" He swallows again, shakes his head, lowers his gaze with something like shame.

Hannibal wonders if he even needs to ask. If he wants to know the answer – if it's relevant. But he has to; "Did you sleep with him, Will?"

"Yes," Will replies hoarsely. "I had to let him…think it was possible. Us. I knew I had to kill him, when he wouldn't leave. I tried to strangle him in the middle of the night, but he wasn't as deeply asleep as I thought."

"Is that when he did this?" Hannibal murmurs, brushing his thumb over the bruising on Will's neck.

Will nods. "He let me shower. He let me take a phone call." His eyes flash to Hannibal's again. "I'm glad it was you, who called. I knew you'd understand. That you'd come to help me."

Hannibal smiles. "Of course," he replies. His hand hasn't moved from Will's neck and Will doesn't seem to mind, or care. He's trusting and lax in Hannibal's hold, and Hannibal looks back to the body again. "I can take care of this."

"Is he on anyone's radar?"

"Jack told me they had no photo of his face – not a good one, anyway – and we're still waiting on DNA results. Depending on if he's in the system already, I shall have to change the story to accommodate, but I do not believe it will be difficult." He pauses. "If nothing comes up, then he will become another shadow in the wind. If they do find his name, and figure out who and what he is…. Well."

"They'll know we were married," Will says. "Jack will suspect me. They always suspect the partner first."

Hannibal nods. "Unfortunately, yes." He pauses, and looks around. "We shall have to hide your notes on the Ripper, and your other patients. If the FBI investigates you, and confiscates them, they may be able to translate them and I'm not sure you'd want them knowing about your…research."

"Can you do that?" Will asks, frowning.

"You can keep the journals at my home," Hannibal suggests, as lightly as he can manage.

Will regards him for a long, long moment, before he presses his lips together, and nods. "Alright," he replies. He looks back at Randall. He still doesn't do anything to move Hannibal's hand from him, so Hannibal acts more bravely, brushing his thumb along Will's tendon, the collarbone exposed past the neck of his shirt. He squeezes Will's shoulder and gently curls his hand around the nape of his neck.

Will shivers, but doesn't fight it. "His DNA will be all over my room," he whispers. "My shower. If they go in there, they'll be able to find the bleach. They'll know something else happened. *Fuck*." He rubs his hands over both cheeks, up through his hair until his fingertips touch Hannibal's knuckles.

Hannibal takes his hand, pulls it to his side. Will goes, his breathing unsteady and harsh, his eyes wide when he looks up and meets Hannibal's gaze.

"Will," he breathes, and cups Will's face with his other hand. "Do you trust me?"

Will bites his lower lip. His eyes drop to Hannibal's mouth, a brief gesture that Hannibal would have missed if he were any other man. His fingers tighten around Hannibal's, lacing together.

"Yes," he replies after another moment.

"I will help you," Hannibal vows. He keeps his touch gentle on Will's face, brushes his thumb over Will's cheekbone, and smiles. "You will follow any commands I give you, to the letter, and you must trust me, if we are to see the other side of this."

"I can," Will says, then clears his throat. "I will."

Hannibal's smile widens. "Good," he purrs, and takes his hand from Will's face. He looks at Randall, and huffs a short laugh. "I think there might be something to your theory," he says. Will's eyes flash to the side of his face, and Hannibal squeezes his fingers, once, gently. "Your hands are getting warmer."

Will's cheeks turn pink, he swallows and looks away. "Yours, too," he replies. "Heat by proxy."

Hannibal sighs.

"I never wanted to drag you into this," Will says. "I was reckless, and acted rashly with Tobias. Instinctually, just as I did with Randall. And now here you are, in this mess along with me."

"I got here on my own," Hannibal replies. He smiles when Will meets his eyes. "But I'm glad for the company."

Will's cheeks darken, his mouth twitches before he smiles back. "As am I."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> I'll say this chapter took a damn left turn and it's all Will's fault but I'm actually really happy with it so

"Jack."

"We got a hit on the saliva from Franklyn's body. It belongs to Randall Tier, who moved to Wisconsin last winter." Hannibal presses his lips together when Jack pauses. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but that's Will's ex-husband's name, isn't it?"

Hannibal deliberates over lying, before he sighs. "Yes," he murmurs. His eyes are on Will's house, as he's returned from relocating Randall's body to his apartment for dissection and butchering. Randall's car is gone, and there are no lights on in Will's house. He's doing what he did with Tobias' car, at Hannibal's behest.

Hannibal also took all of Will's journals on the Ripper to his apartment. He eagerly anticipates translating them when he has the time.

Jack's voice grows dark when he says; "That's a direct link between Will and a killer, Hannibal. Have you spoken to him yet?"

"Yes," Hannibal says. Jack knows he didn't spend the night, so he doesn't pretend to have done so – the hole in Will's alibi could be damning. "When I told him that Franklyn was dead, he was very upset. I didn't want to press the issue of our suspect."

"Well, we need to press him now," Jack says. "Are you still there?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "I'll let you know what I find."

Jack huffs, and hangs up. Hannibal's phone immediately begins to vibrate again, and he smiles when he sees Will's name on the screen.

He answers. "Is it done?"

"Yes," Will replies. He sounds out of breath. "Can you come pick me up?"

"Of course." Will gives him the address and Hannibal hangs up, pulling out of the parking lot and driving across Baltimore, to Annapolis. Will went to a different chop shop and Hannibal finds him several blocks from the nearest one, waiting at a taxi stand.

Will smiles and gets in the car, unzipping his raincoat and pushing the hood from his head. He doesn't seem nearly as upset over having to do this a second time as Hannibal anticipated. Perhaps he's getting used to killing.

Maybe he just appreciates the fact that he won't have to worry about Randall ever again. Ridding the world of evil is a satisfying feeling.

"Jack got a match for the saliva on Franklyn's body," Hannibal tells him when Will's hands stop shaking from cold. Will looks at him, blinks, and frowns. "He knows it's Randall. He knows you were married to him."

Will bites his lower lip, and sets his gaze forward again. "I have an idea," he says.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Do tell."

Will shifts his weight, and Hannibal feels his eyes on the side of his face. He darts them across, just briefly, sees something calculating and hesitant in Will's bright eyes.

"What if," he begins. Stops, swallows, tries again; "What if Randall didn't get away this time?"

Hannibal tilts his head to one side.

"We could make it look like something else."

Hannibal hums, not quite sure where Will is going with this.

"What if the Ripper killed Randall?" Will finishes, whisper-quiet.

Hannibal's eyebrows rise before he can get control of himself. He swallows, flexes his hands on the wheel. "It would have to be very convincing," he says, slowly. "And public."

Will smiles. "You and I know the Ripper better than anyone, Agent Lecter," he replies. His voice has gotten lower, pleased. Purring. "Who better than us to recreate it? If you and I read the scene – or probably just you, since I doubt Jack would let me within ten miles of it – and we write it off as a Ripper murder, Jack would have no choice but to turn his eyes away. From both of us."

Hannibal hums, and doesn't answer.

"I'm sure he'll forgive us," Will adds.

"Who?"

"The Ripper." Will swallows – Hannibal hears his throat click, his teeth grinding. His fingers fidget in his lap and Hannibal takes a deep breath, smells engine oil and rainwater. "He'll understand, that we had to do it."

Hannibal blinks, and looks at Will again when he comes to a stop at a red light. Will is looking forward, worrying the side of his lower lip between his teeth. "That's a curious thing

to say," he murmurs.

Will shrugs one shoulder. "The Ripper is watching us, Agent," he replies. "I have no doubt of that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He told me."

Hannibal huffs a laugh, smiling when Will looks at him. "Having more of your conversations, are you?" he murmurs, affectionate and soft.

Will huffs, rolls his eyes, and sits back in his chair. "Give me Randall's body," he says, crossing his arms over his chest. "If you're not willing to help me, I'll do it myself."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, purring internally at the thought of Will doing such a thing with his own hands. "What if you're caught?"

"Then I won't drag you down with me."

Oh, Hannibal wants to. He desperately wants to.

So he will. It would be interesting to see what would happen.

"Very well," he replies. Will looks at him, like he expected more of a fight, but when he smiles, it shows his teeth. "I'll take you there."

Hannibal gets a call from Jack, and Jack is rushed and low and insists Hannibal does not bring Will to this crime scene, which is in a museum in Baltimore. Specifically, at an exhibit consisting largely of prehistoric predators.

It's fitting, Hannibal thinks, as he drives over. His mind is abuzz with anticipation. He hasn't heard from Will since he gave Will Randall's body, two days prior, and has spent much of his time translating Will's notebooks in the sanctuary of his home:

"Today he comes dressed in blue. He smiles at me and asks me how I've been sleeping. I tell him that's not why we're here. When he asks why we are here, I can't answer. I don't have an answer. I should stop, but the idea of stopping hurts. I can't."

He speeds over and rushes out of his car, past the M.E.'s truck and Beverly and Jimmy where they're in conversation, waiting for Hannibal to finish examining the scene before they conduct their own analysis.

He follows the line of people to the exhibit, finds himself greeted with skulls and skeletons of great beasts long-dead. All of them have wicked claws and fangs, and Hannibal remembers how Randall had snarled at him, had bared similarly sharp teeth.

He smiles.

Jack meets his eyes and Hannibal schools his expression, greets him with a nod. "Will with you?" he asks sharply.

Hannibal shakes his head.

"Good," Jack replies. He turns and leads Hannibal down a hallway, and they turn a corner and Hannibal stops in his tracks.

Randall is propped up, his position feline, and molded like a lunging wildcat. His ribs are that of an animal, his back legs snapped the wrong way to mimic a tiger or puma. His scalp and cheeks sit, exposed, above the jaw of a sabre-tooth.

Hannibal is not surprised by the warmth in his chest, but he is hit, very suddenly and forcefully, by a gut-clenching spike of arousal, when he sees it.

This is Will's design, and oh God Almighty, is it beautiful.

He approaches the carcass slowly, breathes deep and tries to keep his blood from rushing lower.

"It's Tier," Jack says darkly. "Time of death was around two days ago." His upper lip wrinkles in disgust. "All this was done after."

Hannibal swallows, his fingers flexing. He wants to touch, wants to see if the heat in Will's hands has expanded and etched itself like fissures of magma into Randall's skin. Randall's eyes are glossy and staring, piercing him through, and his shoulders tense, his spine gets hot, as he comes to a stop in front of the monument.

"Beautiful," he whispers.

"What was that?"

Hannibal clears his throat, and turns his head to look at Jack. "I believe," he says coolly, "that the Ripper has returned."

Jack blinks, his eyes wide and bulging like a gaping fish out of water. Hannibal turns his attention back to the body and he crouches down, eye-level. He wants to see Will's reflection in them, but only sees his own.

It's a perfect likeness, he thinks, to something he might have done. Randall wanted to be an animal, and so that is what Will made him – one final testament, out of love and honor.

"This is a monument," he says, louder so Jack doesn't ask him to repeat himself.

Jack frowns. "To who?"

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, straightens. "Will has studied the Ripper extensively," he says. "So, too, did he know Randall. Perhaps he would be able to lend some insight."

Jack growls. "You've studied the Ripper, too," he says tightly. "I'm much more interested in your opinion. You've gone from nay-sayer to believer, Hannibal. Why?"

"Look at it," Hannibal says, and gestures to the body. "The brutality and skill is a mirror-image, Jack. I can't imagine anyone else carrying out this kill so precisely." He looks back at Randall's staring eyes. "Budge wanted to play music for the Ripper, and now he's dead. Perhaps the Ripper met Randall, once he returned, and saw in him a creature that needed to be set free." He pauses. "He set him free."

"Hannibal," Jack says, and Hannibal looks at him. "I will ask you once." Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Do you think Will has anything to do with this?"

"No, Jack," Hannibal replies quietly. "I genuinely don't."

Jack nods. "I'm going to check his alibi anyway."

Hannibal clears his throat, reaches out before Jack can turn away. "I will confess something," he says, and steps closer. "I…went to Will's house, the night after you called me to Franklyn's murder. I did not leave it until this morning."

Jack frowns, cocks his head to one side.

Hannibal wants to look at Will's kill again. The stare of Randall's eyes makes his chest shiver with pleasure. Will did this – Will did this for *him*, copied his kills and his likeness and Hannibal might dance with joy. The touch is perfect, but still so distinctly Will, and Hannibal would mourn the loss of that much good meat except that the end result is as satisfying as a well-cooked meal.

He must see Will properly rewarded for his efforts.

Jack grumbles. "What do you mean, you haven't left?"

Hannibal sighs, dropping his hand. "I mean that Will and I are together," he says plainly. Jack blinks at him and takes a minute step back. Hannibal's mouth twitches. "And that there was no point, in the last two days, when he could have acted in any way that would tie him to this tableau."

Jack blanches, as Beverly and Jimmy finally come inside.

She crows with delight and slaps a hand on Hannibal's shoulder. "Go get 'em, tiger!"

Jimmy rolls his eyes. At his shoulder appears Brian, and Hannibal huffs.

Hannibal looks back at Jack. He wants to go to Will's side immediately. "Will that be all?" he murmurs.

Jack presses his lips together, and nods, grumbling again. "The Ripper's back," he says darkly. "He's back."

"Yes," Hannibal whispers, and looks to Randall one last time. He commits the image to memory, imagines Will's hands stroking over his smooth cheeks, imagines him tearing his spine away and fitting it into this perfect hunter's curve.

Oh, Will, I would never have guessed.

"Until next time, then," he says with a nod to those gathered, and leaves the exhibit with heartbeat racing but steps unhurried.

Will's front door is unlocked, like he's expecting Hannibal to come to him. Perhaps he is – clearly Will has studied the Ripper far more deeply than even Hannibal knows, and through that extension, he must know more about Hannibal himself than he's letting on.

He hears Will's soft laugh, closes the door behind him and hangs his coat behind the door. The door to the dining room is slightly open, revealing soft golden light.

"I'm glad you like it," Will murmurs, soft with affection. Hannibal blinks, and pauses, head tilted to one side.

He hears no one answer, and Will laughs again. "Agent Lecter," he calls. "It's rude to eavesdrop."

Hannibal smiles, and pushes the door open. Will's bright eyes meet him, and there are two glasses of wine poured – one in front of Will, where he sat during his confrontation with Randall, and a second at the head of the table, where the chair is askew as though waiting for someone to take it.

Or, perhaps, it is already occupied.

"Will," Hannibal breathes, unable to help himself. His blood burns with technicolor dye, dazzles him behind the eyes as he circles Will's chair, touches his shoulders, and takes his seat. Will has more of that dark red wine for them both, the color of old blood.

Will smiles at him, eyelids lowered, cheeks flushed. The bottle between them is more than half empty and Hannibal knows he's been drinking for a while.

Hannibal settles, takes a drink, and smiles at Will. "I saw what you made of Randall," he murmurs. Will's eyes glow in the soft light, pleasured, pupils wide. "You gave him in death what he could not have in life."

Will hums. "Was it enough to convince Jack?" he murmurs, cradling his own glass.

Hannibal nods. "A remarkable likeness," he says, and it comes out as praise and he means it as such. Will's cheeks darken, and he bites his lower lips, rests his hand on the table like a dog might sit at its master's feet and ask for food. Hannibal sits forward, takes Will's hand, finds it burning hot to the touch.

"Will," he breathes, brushing his thumb over Will's knuckles. Will's eyes snap to his, hold, amber and ocean trapped and melted together to create sea glass. "I was moved by it. Deeply."

Will smiles and it shows his teeth, lopsided and borderline flirtatious. "You have a great advantage over me, Agent Lecter," he says. Hannibal blinks. "You should be disgusted. You should arrest me. Instead, you look at me like that, and tell me I move you."

"I have always been moved by art," Hannibal replies. "That is how I saw that canvass."

"And me?" Will says, lifts his chin and sips his wine. "Am I an artist, or a canvass?"

Hannibal smiles. "I'm starting to think you are both, and neither," he replies. "You are… something else entirely."

"I think I'm attracted to killers," Will says. Hannibal presses his lips together. "So, too, they might be attracted to me. Because I'm like them. I understand them." He pauses, sighs, draws his hand away and Hannibal aches to chase him – he could, and he thinks Will would let him. "I dismembered my ex-husband, displayed him for the world to see, and I felt nothing. How is that possible?"

"Did you feel nothing, or did you simply think there was nothing to feel?"

Will frowns. "Isn't that the same thing?"

Hannibal smiles, and shakes his head. "One is completion," he says. "The other, potential. You could have felt nothing because the work was done, and Randall was nothing more than a spark in your memory of happier times. Or, you felt nothing doing what you did, because you knew there was so much more you could be doing."

"And you?" Will asks. "When you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs, did you feel nothing, or was there nothing to feel?"

Hannibal's smile widens. He meets Will's half-lidded gaze, sees his reflection in his pupils. He feels ravenous. "Both," he whispers.

"Other," Will replies. He presses his lips together, swallows. "I've been thinking a lot about… certain things."

Hannibal sits back, sips his wine, raises an eyebrow. "Care to share?"

Will's eyes flash, finally opening fully. He turns his gaze to his wine, swirls it in the bowl of the glass, presses his lips together and licks them. "Desperately," he whispers.

"Then share."

"No." Will shakes his head sharply. "I can't. Not this."

"Will, you can tell me."

"No," Will says again. His jaw tightens and his grits his teeth, whitens his knuckles around the stem of his glass. "I know how to read people, Hannibal. I know how to read them really damn well. I'm the best at it."

"I believe you," Hannibal murmurs.

"And what am I to make of you returning from a murder scene, knowing I'm the one who did it, and you look at me like that?" Will's eyes flash to him.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal says. "How am I looking at you?"

Will swallows, darts his eyes to the chair opposite him. It's also pulled out, Hannibal notices.

"That is why I can't tell you," he breathes, exhale loud.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, lets out a soft hum into his glass, breathes the sharp notes deep and takes another drink.

"Who will you tell, if not me?"

Will swallows. "Where one truth comes, more will follow," he says. Hannibal's shoulders tighten, briefly, and he looks at Will curiously for a moment. Will's eyes don't move, like he's staring someone down that only he can see.

"I'm not a profiler," Will continues. "I don't take courses like you do at the Bureau. I can only speak to what I know, what I have studied, and what comes to me in my waking dreams. And I tell you, Hannibal, what I see doesn't scare me. Not in the slightest. But it threatens me all the same."

Hannibal frowns. "I don't understand."

Will sighs, looks down at his glass, raises his eyes and holds Hannibal's steady, tides rushing out before the tsunami wave hits.

Then, he smiles. Hannibal doesn't know what he sees, but he likes that smile on Will immensely. It's how he imagines Will smiled when he tore Randall apart.

He sits forward, lets go of his wine glass and takes his hand from Hannibal's, rests his chin on his palm. "Do you think the Ripper will forgive me, for pinning a murder on him?"

Hannibal blinks. "I doubt he'll mind," he replies coolly. His heart flutters at the look in Will's eyes.

"It was presumptuous of me," Will says. "I stole his style. The brushes and canvass were my own, but I copied him. Some say it's flattery, to mimic someone. Others say it's lazy. Plagiarism."

Hannibal sets his own glass down. "How else does a student learn?" he replies.

Will hums, eyes at half-mast, and then he stands. Hannibal's eyes and face rise to follow, and Will slowly circles the edge of the table – prowling, he's *prowling*. And he comes to a stop at the angled degree of Hannibal's armrest.

"If I am a student," he murmurs, traces his fingers feather-light on the edge of the table until he meets Hannibal's arm. Their eyes lock, and Hannibal freezes in the ice. "And you are my guard and my guide, what does that make you?"

"Suggesting I am your master?"

"Suggesting I might learn from you," Will says, smile off-kilter. "When I cut Randall apart, and mounted him on that display, the Ripper was with me, making sure I was careful with DNA and fingerprints, telling me I should snap his bones *this* way." His fingers touch Hannibal's wrist, slide up. "Twist his spine *that* way."

Hannibal growls as Will leans in, and his fingers curl, wanting to reach. The heat he'd felt at seeing Will's design rears up in him again, blistering and new like a resurrected beast.

"The Ripper is a man again," Will breathes. His free hand touches Hannibal's face, thumb traces the curve of his lower lip, pads of his fingertips splayed out wide along Hannibal's cheek, and then flatten wholly so he's cupping Hannibal's jaw. "And he has your voice."

Hannibal trembles.

"Your hands."

His knuckles whiten.

"Your heat."

Hannibal meets Will's eyes, unblinking.

Will smiles, slow, wide. A snake set to devour. "Now, Agent Lecter," he finishes, "what am I to make of that?"

Will's forehead touches Hannibal's, and he breathes out, wine and honey on his tongue. Hannibal thinks back to all he could have said, all he could have done, and he wonders where the slip was – the too-casual response, the lilt in his voice, the jerk of his wrist.

Or perhaps it wasn't in his behavior at all. Will looks at people, and he knows. And he promised he would not be blinded again.

"You are not afraid?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles, shakes his head. His hands are gentle and warm, burning. He's a killer.

"Will." Hannibal's voice cracks in an unseemly way, when Will merely stays there, static and waiting.

"I don't want to presume."

"Presume," Hannibal breathes. "Plagiarize. Learn."

Will opens his eyes wide, meets Hannibal's. Their noses brush as he huffs a laugh. "You'll teach me?"

Hannibal can't take it anymore. He curls his hand around the nape of Will's neck and rises, wraps his other arm around Will's waist. Crushes him close and tight enough to drive the air from Will's lungs.

"I'll teach you," he growls, rough and low, and Will's overjoyed, stuttering laugh is lost when their lips meet. Will's kiss is soft, and Hannibal feels in it years of longing, of adoration, respect and joy, bubbling up and spewing forth in the form of a gentle, breathless gasp. He breaks the kiss, drives for air, tightens his hand on Will's nape and puts his other hand in Will's hair. Will clutches him back. "I'll teach you everything, darling."

Will trembles against him, breathless and raptured, and keeps his throat exposed – trusting, innocent, ready to be repainted anew – as Hannibal kisses him again.

Chapter 15

Questions rise up in Hannibal's mind, one after the other in quick flashes of light and sound. When did Will figure it out? Was it in Jack's office, when Hannibal argued that the Ripper couldn't possibly have resurfaced? Was it the first time their fingers touched, and Will had felt the heat in his hands? Was it when Hannibal talked him down after killing Tobias and helped him dispose of the body?

Or, maybe, it was even before all that. From the second Hannibal stepped into his office and parried with him about God and death. Maybe it was when Will called him a King, and he knew the truth in the words as soon as they were spoken.

He wants to ask. He needs to know, too curious to let it slip away. But Will's hands are wide and desperate on his waist, Will's mouth lures him in like they're hooked on a fishing line. His warmth, his scent, the red wine on his tongue, calls to Hannibal, begs him to step closer, whispers '*Here, pretty monster, come out and play*'.

Hannibal still has his hand around Will's nape, his other fisted tight in his hair, Will's shoulders trapped and tucked against him as they kiss. Hannibal's heart is beating fast, not quite racing but gearing up for the sprint, his mouth is tender from Will's lips, his ears ringing with every breathless exhale, every soft, needy moan he coaxes out of Will, and his hands -.

Oh, how his hands burn.

Will breaks the kiss with a gasp, his eyes heavy-lidded so that only a slip of gunmetal blue is visible. His lips are tender and pink, darker than the flush that kisses his cheeks and is starting to spread down his neck.

He trembles in Hannibal's arms, a single rowboat tossed on seas that promise a storm.

Hannibal gentles his hand, slides it to the front of Will's neck so that Tobias' string cut and Randall's imprint is completely obscured. Will shivers, lifting his chin. His breathing is unsteady, his eyes glazed, and when he smiles, it shows his teeth.

Hannibal cups his cheek with his other hand, smiles when Will sucks in a breath and turns his face into the touch, nose at Hannibal's thumb. "When did you figure it out?" he asks.

Will sighs. One hand leaves Hannibal's side, curls around his wrist so that Will can kiss his palm. "I'm not sure when the idea first struck," he replies. "But the more I thought about it, the more I was sure. You're a curious man, and you need to know, and learn. You went through my notes, seeking to know what I'd written about you. You accepted offers for my company, despite the fact that any proud man would want to distance himself from me."

He pauses. "You sent Tobias to kill me."

Hannibal blinks, and tilts his head to one side.

Will smiles at him. He doesn't look upset. "I find it hard to believe that he entered my house, passed your room, and didn't wake you. You knew he was there. You wanted to see what would happen."

"A decision I do not regret," Hannibal says.

"Why would you?" Will asks lightly. "If he'd succeeded, I'd be dead, and you wouldn't have to worry about me. Yet I won, and in that moment, became indebted to you."

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he says softly.

Will's eyes open fully, and he meets Hannibal's gaze. He's steadier, now, still shaking, but not from anything Hannibal would name as fear or anxiety. Rather, he looks at Hannibal like he's hungry. He bites his lower lip, and swallows, and Hannibal's fingers tighten instinctively around his throat.

"There's something I need to tell you," Will murmurs.

"Is this that same subject you wouldn't broach with me before?" Hannibal asks.

I can't share. Not this.

Will nods. He releases Hannibal's wrist and waist and takes a step back, and Hannibal lets him go. His fingers curl with the desire to feel Will's warmth under his hands again. He wants to see Will burn for him. "Now that we understand each other," Will says, "it is important that you know everything."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and Will nods to his chair.

"Sit."

Hannibal obeys, and Will smiles at him, before he turns to the kitchen. Hannibal watches him go, marveling how this unassuming, innocent man had changed even in such a short time. He's a killer now, there's no denying that, and Hannibal has given him the opportunity to play his music, and create his art.

Will returns, and in his hand is a large knife that Hannibal would use for slicing meat. He is looking down at it, and then he raises his eyes, meets Hannibal's. He takes his seat at Hannibal's right hand, and sets the knife down, handle angled so that Hannibal would be in the best position to grab it.

Will is silent for a long while, and then he sighs, sitting forward and taking a sip from his wine glass.

His eyes meet Hannibal's, bright, greener now. The blossom of new life and opportunity changes the color, makes them resemble sea foam and crystal the color of aquamarine. "I have one final confession, Agent Lecter," he says quietly. Hannibal tilts his head to one side, hands flattening on his thighs at the shadow that crosses Will's face.

"You're not afraid," he murmurs, and Will shakes his head. "But you are threatened. By whom?"

"By you," Will replies. "You observed that I would only allow the Ripper to kill me. I think there's more truth to that than I would like to admit. And yet, I hold out a weapon to you. You may do with it as you see fit, when my confession is done."

Hannibal sits forward, his elbows on the table. Will's shoulders tense and his fingers curl around his wine glass. "Then confess."

Will shivers, bites his lower lip, and tilts his head so that his neck is exposed. His eyes land on the chair opposite him, still pulled out and empty. Hannibal wonders if he still sees the man of shadow, if he's watching with a smile on his face and holding out his own hand. If Will feels the pull.

"Jack came to me, after our session," he tells Hannibal. "He told me he wanted me to shadow you before he mentioned it in his office. He has his…suspicions, about you as well."

Hannibal blinks, frowning.

"I called him, after I was done with Randall's body," he says. "I told him I killed Randall in self-defense, and that I thought I could draw out the Ripper by creating a display out of him." Will swallows. "I told him to watch you, when he called you to the crime scene."

Hannibal's fingers curl, and he gives a curious hum, his eyes sliding down to the knife at his elbow. "Does he know?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "Only if you gave yourself away. But he suspects."

Will lets go of his glass, his fingers shaking, and he presses his lips together and meets Hannibal's eyes. "I was going to tell Jack what I knew," he says. Hannibal tenses. "I knew, when you wanted to hide my notes at your apartment. I knew, when you looked at Randall's body and smiled. Like you were satisfied – another threat neutralized by my hand. I could see pride in you, the same way a King watches his son come back from war with the enemy's head."

"That was days ago," Hannibal murmurs. "Yet you did not tell Jack." Will shakes his head. "Why?"

"I couldn't," Will breathes, his confession soft. "You asked me to trust you, and I did. You ask me to love you, and I do."

Hannibal sits back, and wraps his fingers around the knife. Will doesn't move, except to swallow, when Hannibal stands. He circles the table and settles behind Will's chair, runs a hand through his hair and tilts his head back, exposing his throat.

He lays the knife on Will's shoulder, turns it in so it kisses Will's neck. "And now?" he says, lowly.

"My loyalty was like a sheep that was led astray," Will says. His eyes are closed, and nothing about him suggests he's gearing up for a fight. He's trusting and lax in Hannibal's hold. Hannibal's fingers tighten, and he turns the knife so that the flat edge rests over Will's neck. It makes him shiver, and Hannibal sets the blade under his jaw. "You followed it, and carried it home."

Hannibal smiles. "You will not run?"

Will swallows, opens his eyes and stares up at the ceiling. "I will not."

"You will not betray me?"

"I cannot."

Hannibal hums, tugs on Will's hair to hear him gasp, see his hips arch like he's going to bend back over the chair at Hannibal's will. Hannibal is careful with the knife, steady when he turns it and points the blade under Will's ear.

"Well then, darling," he murmurs, and Will shivers, his knuckles white against his thighs. "There's only one thing to do."

He digs the point of the blade in, pleased by its sharpness as it cuts Will's skin, and a small bead of blood the same color of the wine wells up around it.

Will winces, his lips part, and Hannibal leans down to kiss the droplet away.

"What is that?" he whispers, trembling. His voice is very low, lower than Hannibal has ever heard it, and almost completely silent. Hannibal can smell the heat of his skin, taste the rush of his pulse when he kisses Will's bruised throat. How eagerly his blood leaps up to sate Hannibal's hunger. He licks his lips, chasing the aftertaste of Will's life.

He kisses Will's ear, and sets the knife down in front of them, pointing towards the empty chair. "You must prove it."

"You will invite Jack to dinner at your home. You will tell him everything you know, and you will kill him."

Will nods. "He'll have a gun," he says. "He'll be strong. Well-trained. Will you be there?"

"Of course, darling. I would never let anything happen to you."

Will smiles. "How often do we recognize the bolt of fate when it slides home?"

"Not often enough." Hannibal smiles. They're in Will's study, firelight the only source of illumination. Under its golden touch, Will looks wild and fine. The shadows in his eyes prowl and chase each other, eager to be set upon a new target. His fingers curl, and Hannibal

reaches out to sooth his hand over Will's knuckles. "Little did Jack Crawford know what he had started, when he ordered my evaluation."

Will nods, swallows tightly. He bares his neck when Hannibal leans in, lets Hannibal kiss the little wound under his ear. Hannibal's fingers tighten around Will's, and he imagines how he must have looked, tearing Randall apart with his bare hands. Rearranging a man is no small feat.

"You have found your way into my hearth, Will," he growls, smiling when he sees goose bumps break out down Will's neck, hears the shiver in his inhale. "The King has invited you to his table. Will you feast with him?"

"Readily," Will replies. "For as long as I am welcome."

Hannibal's smile widens. He takes Will's hand and puts it against his chest, and Will's fingers curl. He turns into Hannibal, their foreheads touch, noses brushing, and he trembles when Hannibal wraps a hand in his hair.

"My only regret," he murmurs against Will's mouth, "is that I will not get the chance to read all those conversations you shared with me. I will not follow the story of your change, and transformation, when the moments were quiet, and the Ripper sat in your patient's chair."

"I am not changed," Will says. "I am how I always was. You've simply allowed me to be free. Parted the gates and let me loose."

Hannibal smiles. "Do you wish it were different?"

"Only in knowing, maybe, that I have robbed you of knowing how much you did change me," Will breathes. "Or the creature that I conversed with did. And that creature is you." They're close enough that Hannibal can feel Will's lips move when he speaks. When Will licks his lower lip, Hannibal feels the wet slip of his tongue. "But I will tell you everything."

"We will make new conversations," Hannibal says. His thumb brushes over the mark he left under Will's ear, and Will shivers, his fingers tightening in Hannibal's shirt.

He smiles, and opens his eyes. "I'll bring you the enemy's head," he whispers. Hannibal's stomach clenches with heat, and Will kisses him, lips parted so Hannibal can taste the wine on his tongue. He growls, hand tight in Will's hair, settled on his nape, and kisses him back. They share breath and secrets, and when they must break apart, the shadows in Will's eyes are wild.

"Hannibal," Jack greets, gesturing for him to take a seat when he comes into Jack's office. Hannibal does so, curious as to why Jack has summoned him. "We got a hit on Budge's vehicle. It was abandoned outside a chop shop in Annapolis. The camera feed shows someone who looks a lot like Will leaving the scene."

Hannibal presses his lips together.

Jack eyes him for a long, long time, measuring his reaction. Hannibal gives him nothing in return. "At the museum," he begins. "You didn't say Tobias was gone. You didn't say he was missing. You said he was dead."

Hannibal's mouth twitches. Another slip. Will makes him sloppy. But truthfully, how could he have kept his wits about him, with such a beautiful offer laid out at his table? It's a wonder he formed words at all.

Jack regards him calmly. "Will Graham killed Tobias Budge."

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he replies. "I know."

Jack sits back in his chair, rubbing his hand over his chin. "Tell me why you know?"

"I helped him hide the body," Hannibal says coolly.

Jack's eyes flash, and Hannibal takes note of the gun at his hip. He shifts his weight and steeples his fingers together. "Now, Agent," he says tersely, "why would you do that?"

"Because I believe the good Doctor Graham is the Chesapeake Ripper."

Jack blinks at him. Then, he frowns. Hannibal's smile widens.

"He was the one who convinced you he was back," Hannibal says. "He was the one who so ardently dismissed the copycat." He pauses, watching Jack's reaction, pleased when Jack's brow furrows and his frown deepens. "I have been watching him very closely. I had hoped, by earning his trust, I would get a confession out of him. Helping him with Tobias seemed like the best course of action."

"Will is…" Jack swallows, shakes his head.

"He has surgical knowledge, he's incredibly adept at reading people and picking his targets. He's intelligent enough to evade capture, and to cover his tracks. He has pages and pages on the Ripper murders, Jack, documents the investigation like a man obsessed."

Jack growls. "You're sure?" he says.

"Will's ex-husband was a murderer," Hannibal adds with another nod. "When he grew bored, he left the man, and then killed him when he came back to Baltimore. You saw his handiwork yourself. Can you say any other hand could have carried out such a display, if they were not the Ripper?"

Jack's face is a black mask of anger. He regards Hannibal for a long, long time. "Do you have a confession?"

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he replies.

"Then we must arrest him."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Will told me he would invite you to dinner," he says. "Has he?"

"Yes."

"Excellent," Hannibal murmurs. "I will be there as well. We shall arrest him together."

"Oh?"

"This is my hunt, Jack," Hannibal says. "My quarry. The Ripper has wronged me as much as he's wronged you. I won't let you deny me that victory."

"You told me you and he were…together," Jack says, hesitating on the word. Hannibal nods. "Does he -?"

Hannibal smiles. "He wants us to kill you together," he says. "It's my test. To prove my love."

Jack frowns at him, but his eyes are dark and considering.

Hannibal nods. "No SWAT team. No backup, Jack. This must be done quickly and quietly. Will won't go without a fight, but between the two of us, we can subdue him."

Jack hums. "Quick and quiet," he repeats, and nods, straightening up. "Good. Alright." He eyes Hannibal, laces his fingers together and sets them on his desk. It's so easy to convince a man like Jack to bow to his own pride.

"He'll try to kill you in the kitchen," Hannibal says. "For convenience's sake."

Jack nods. "He will think you're his man in the room. I will think you're mine." Hannibal nods. "When the time comes, will you do what needs to be done?"

Hannibal smiles, showing his teeth. "Oh, absolutely."

Hannibal enters Will's home on Friday afternoon, laden with cooking implements and the rest of Tobias' meat. Will greets him at the door, smiling and helping him with the large pot, and leads the way to the kitchen. There's a bottle of wine on the counter, the same rich, dark red as Will's blood.

They set everything down and Will goes to the bottle, opening it and pouring them two glasses. "Is everything set?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles, and nods. "Jack will be here," he replies. He doesn't tell Will what he told Jack. It will be more fun, this way.

Will nods, taking a sip of wine.

"Are you ready?" Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs. "Why wouldn't I be?" he asks. "I have no loyalty to Jack."

"This kill officially makes you a serial," Hannibal replies. Will's eyes flash, predatory.

He smiles at Hannibal, lopsided, showing his teeth. "I remember challenging you as to our kill count," he says. Hannibal huffs a laugh. "That must have amused you to no end."

"This isn't a competition, darling," he replies.

"Oh?" Will asks, one eyebrow raised. "You do not feel threatened by another man's savagery?"

"You said I'm allowed to kill you," Hannibal says. "I have granted you no such honor."

"I don't want to," Will replies. "If there was no one else in the world, my hands would forever remain clean."

Hannibal smiles. "I would find other ways to sate your hunger, darling."

Will bites his lower lip, shoulders rolling, and he shivers.

His eyes flash to the packages of meat, just visible in one of Hannibal's bags. "What are we having?"

Hannibal smiles. "Heart," he murmurs. "And kidneys."

Will's eyes snap to his, wide. "Tobias'?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, and Will sighs, his smile wide. "I'm sure it'll be delicious."

"Would you like to help?"

Will shakes his head. "I still have some things to pack," he says. Hannibal nods. After they made their plan, they'd arranged to pack up all the things they would like to take. Clothes, cash, passports after the initial night is done. Hannibal's things are in his car, and they will take it up to Will's cabin in northern Maryland, spend the night there, and move on the next day.

Hannibal knows Jack won't have told anyone his plans for the night. He won't be reported missing for quite some time. He's too proud to share his kill with anyone except Hannibal, who demanded it.

Hannibal sets his wine glass down, takes Will by the hair, and kisses him, startling a soft whimper from Will's bruised throat. Will clutches at him, wanton and so in love, Hannibal can taste it.

"Hurry down," he murmurs, and kisses Will one more time. "We must make sure everything is ready when Jack arrives. There's no room for error."

"The perfect musical finale," Will murmurs. "I won't let you down."

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Please note the new tags, and this story is now explicit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal prepares dinner, and Will comes down a half hour later, a suitcase packed. Hannibal nods towards his keys, and Will takes his things, setting them in Hannibal's car. He returns when Hannibal is done preparing the heart, setting it in a baking dish and putting it in the oven. The kidneys, he slices, breads and fries.

Through it all, Will keeps his wine glass full. They move within the kitchen as one unit, silent and smiling. Will takes dishes when they're done, washes them without complaint. He peels carrots without a word, slices spring onions.

All the while, Hannibal keeps touching him. Each touch; *Are you mine*?

Each shiver he receives in answer; *Until the end.*

Will stays close, his cheek to Hannibal's shoulder when Hannibal stands close enough to him. His fingers curl around Hannibal's wrist when they exchange cooking utensils and cutting boards. Hannibal, he will concede, marvels at how easy it is, as though they are two cans of paint that have spilled, and mix together readily to form a new color.

Will told him the Ripper sees things in technicolor. Hannibal must admit that he's right. The sun shines through the windows onto them, illuminating the kitchen with natural light even when it starts to set, the house angled to catch the most sun until nightfall.

Hannibal covers the fried kidneys with Clingfilm and sets the dish in Will's fridge, content to wait until a later time to warm them up. Truthfully, he's not sure if they will get the opportunity to eat them. The dinner with Jack may go one of several ways, and although Hannibal hopes they at least manage to enjoy the meal before the performance, he would not begrudge Will his itchy trigger finger. If Will wants to attack sooner, rather than later, he will of course oblige.

"I wonder what your patients will think has become of you," he says idly.

Will looks up, both hands around the stem of his wine glass, leaning against the sink. He smiles his placid psychiatrist smile, and shrugs one shoulder. "I've been steadily giving them referrals," he replies. Hannibal blinks at him, and Will's smile widens. "After Tobias, I knew it was only a matter of time before something changed."

"Something changed?" Hannibal parrots back.

Will nods. "You know how animals sit when a storm is coming?" he asks, and Hannibal nods. "I felt the same; a shift in the air, a drop in the temperature."

Hannibal gives a thoughtful hum, and nods. "I'm glad that your patients will not be without proper care," he murmurs. Will presses his lips together, darts his eyes away, and Hannibal looks at him. "You do understand the situation, don't you, Will? After this, there's no going back. We will have to flee. To another country, most likely."

Will nods. "I understand," he replies, solemn as a wedding vow.

Hannibal watches him for another moment, before he sighs and turns his attention to the oven, cracking the door to peer into it and check on the status of Tobias' heart. He closes it again, wipes his hands on a towel, and folds his arms across his chest. Will meets his eyes steadily.

"I think," he begins, "that you should sit at the head of the table, tonight."

Will tilts his head to one side, his expression unchanging. Then, the other way, like he's listening to someone whispering in his ear. He sets his wine glass on the counter behind his hip, next to the sink. His mouth twitches like he can't decide whether to smile or frown. "Alright," he replies, serene and pliant. "I am playing host, after all."

Hannibal nods. "Exactly. It would appear improper for me to sit at the head of someone else's table."

"And it puts me between you and Jack, making it easier to subdue me," Will finishes. Hannibal blinks at him, and again finds himself wondering how he has become so predictable – then again, how does one adapt to someone who has spent so much time in one-sided conversation? Clearly Will's manifestation of the Ripper is accurate enough for him to predict, and imagine, and it has given him experience Hannibal does not have. Like he has lost his memory, but Will's remained.

There are so many hours of conversation, of observation of his behavior both imagined and experienced for real, that Hannibal will never be able to read, never absorb. As a result, he gets the impression that he's shown all his cards and hiding them close to his chest is a moot point now. Meanwhile Will, in his vulnerability and trust and complete adoration, has an Ace up his sleeve.

"I -." He stops, swallows. He won't do Will the disservice of denying Will's accusation.

Will *is* smiling, now. He licks his lips, breathes out heavy through his nose, and shakes his head. His smile shows his teeth – Hannibal's favorite smile. "I'm not angry," he says, and Hannibal wants to believe him. "I've come to realize – when you spared my neck, I took that as forgiveness. But a King grants pardons. There's a difference."

"You misunderstand my motivations, Will," Hannibal murmurs.

"Oh? Enlighten me."

"Jack located Tobias Budge's car. He had you on video, at the scene, abandoning it there. He suspected you had something to do with his disappearance, and so when he accused you of killing him, I told him I had helped you dispose of the body."

Will raises an eyebrow. "You really are quite reckless, aren't you?"

"I think you bring it out in me," Hannibal says with a small smile. He approaches Will, and Will straightens against the counter, lifting his chin in challenge when Hannibal slides his hands into place at either side of the bottom of Will's ribs. Hannibal feels him tremble. "Do you think I'd let him kill you?"

"Kill me? No," Will replies quietly, his eyes bright like glaciers in sunlight. "But you told Tobias that obstacles must be removed. I am an obstacle. If I'm arrested, you know I won't turn on you, and so you can continue on without worrying about removing yourself from your routine. Your plans. Your way of life is important to you."

Hannibal doesn't answer, and Will swallows, and rests his fingers lightly on Hannibal's chest. His fingertips find the Saint Michael pendant and press down so the edges bite into Hannibal's skin and the outline shows through his shirt.

"What are you, if not an Agent? If not the Ripper?" Will murmurs.

Hannibal smiles, and leans in to touch his forehead to Will's. "I suppose that makes me yours, doesn't it?"

Will shivers. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear."

"But what you want to hear is the truth, no?" Hannibal replies, gently sliding his hands up Will's flanks, around his back. He spreads his fingers out wide and Will's breath hitches, he meets Hannibal's eyes, their noses brush and Hannibal can taste the wine on Will's exhale, see the pink of raw meat darkening his cheeks.

"What I want…" Will stops, sighs, and shivers when Hannibal kisses him. He arches against Hannibal's chest, as sweet and desperate as the first time. His hands flatten on Hannibal's arms and tighten, nails digging in through his shirt.

Hannibal deepens the kiss, coaxes Will's jaws apart so he can curl his tongue behind his teeth. Will gasps, his hands tightening further. "Tell me," Hannibal demands.

"You already know," Will replies, unsteady around his inhale.

"I would have you say it." Hannibal runs one hand up, circles in front of Will's arm, touches his bruised throat. As close as they're pressed he can feel how Will's thighs tighten and spread, oh so subtly. His hands are burning hot behind Hannibal's clothes.

"I want your legacy," Will breathes, whining when Hannibal kisses him again, more chastely this time, but no less passionate. "If I am to be carted off to jail at the end of the night, I want to be taken away with the memory of your touch. I want to know you."

"And if I told you I have no intention of letting you be taken?" Hannibal growls. He parts from Will's mouth, kisses his red cheek, the stubble on his jaw. His neck, where his pulse is flying fast and heavy. He bites down around the knife mark he placed below Will's ear, sucking the skin to a darker shade of pink and Will moans, stifled behind clenched teeth. His nails rise up and dig into Hannibal's shoulders, knees spreading to give Hannibal room to press closer, plant his hands on the counter behind Will's hips and force him against it.

Will doesn't answer, and Hannibal smiles, flattening his hand over Will's bruised throat and forcing his head up, back, so that Hannibal can meet his eyes. He looms over Will and leans in, gently biting at Will's wetted lower lip. Will whimpers when he does it.

"You aren't burning hot enough for me, yet," he says, pleased and proud at the challenging light in Will's eyes. "One more kill should do it."

Will swallows, and Hannibal growls at the feeling of his throat moving under his hand. "Jack," he rasps.

Hannibal smiles. "Jack."

Will nods, lets go of Hannibal's shoulder to circle his fingers around Hannibal's wrist, squeezing gently. "I won't disappoint you," he promises.

Hannibal's smile widens enough to show his teeth. "I know, darling," he replies, and rewards Will with a kiss.

Jack arrives at the appointed hour, and Hannibal greets him at the door. He takes his coat and they share a look – Jack has the calm determination of a gladiator about to enter the fighting ring. He's calm, deadly so, and Hannibal fights the urge to smile.

"He's in the kitchen," Hannibal says. "Come. Have a seat."

Jack raises an eyebrow, but nods, and Hannibal leads the way to the dining room and gestures for Jack to take his place at the right side of the head of the table. Hannibal will sit on the left, with his back to the wall, and Will's place is at the head of the table.

Jack breathes deeply, his eyes dark on the glasses of wine already sitting out. "Should I trust the food?" he asks, humor falling flat.

Hannibal laughs. "He wouldn't do us the injustice of poison," Hannibal replies. "Remember; he thinks he has my loyalty, and my love." He watches Jack consider the wine glass for another moment, before taking a sip. He lets out a huff of appreciation, as though surprised that it's good.

Jack looks behind him, to the kitchen entrance. Hannibal can hear Will pottering around within the kitchen, preparing the plates as Hannibal instructed. "Does he suspect anything?"

"Are you doubting my performance?' Hannibal asks mildly.

"Not yours," Jack replies. "I would have never guessed at his true nature, had you not told me." He pauses. "Never in a thousand years."

"People like the Ripper are masters at covering their tracks, and hiding in plain sight." Hannibal nods to the empty bookshelves behind Jack. "Those shelves were once full of notes and details of the Ripper murders."

Jack raises both eyebrows. "Where are they now?"

Hannibal smiles. "At my apartment," he says. "For evidence."

"He trusted you with them?"

"He trusts me with a lot of things," Hannibal replies coolly, taking a sip of wine. "I'm a trustworthy person."

Jack huffs. "I can't believe it," he says, quietly so Will doesn't hear. "After all these years, I'll finally have the son of a bitch in custody. I feel like a child waiting to unwrap his birthday present."

Hannibal smiles, wide. "From me, to you."

Will enters the room at that moment, carrying the tray of fried kidneys in one hand, cradling the dish with the baked heart in the other. He sets down the kidneys first, using both hands to steady the heart as he places it between Jack and Hannibal. The scent of roasted carrots and fresh meat fills Hannibal's nose.

The baking dish cradles the same large knife that Will handed to Hannibal during his confession, as well as a large serving fork.

He smiles at Jack. "So glad you could make it, Agent Crawford," he says warmly, and takes his seat.

Jack smiles back at him, tightly. "Smells delicious," he replies. "What are we having?"

"Stuffed roast heart," Will replies smoothly. "And fried kidneys."

Jack blinks at Will. He swallows audibly. "Interesting," he replies. "Never had heart before."

Will smiles, fingers curling around the stem of his glass. He takes a sip and stands, ready to slice up the heart and serve it out. "It's a symbol of power in many cultures, consuming the heart."

Jack hums, his eyes on the meat as Will serves him a slice of it, scoops up some of the dark sauce and the carrots, and places two slices of the fried kidneys next to it. Will does the same for Hannibal and himself, and sits back down.

"Bon Appetit," Will says, lifting his glass. Hannibal smiles and clinks their together, before he begins to eat. He doesn't miss how Jack hesitates on his first bite, and only eats the carrots, but gives a hum of appreciation all the same.

"Delicious, Will," he says with a gesture of his fork. Will smiles at him.

"Thank you," he replies. "Hannibal helped me with it."

Jack's eyes flash to Hannibal. "That so?" he murmurs.

Will nods. "I'm not much of a cook, myself," he says mildly, between one bite of kidney and the next. "Most of my diet consists of boxed meals and coffee. But Hannibal is a steadfast and thorough teacher."

Despite himself, Hannibal smiles.

Jack makes another soft sound of assent. "I had no idea you liked to cook, Hannibal," he says mildly.

"Been at it since I was a child," Hannibal replies, his eyes on Jack's face as he processes that statement. Jack, to his credit, doesn't react except to hesitate on his next bite. "I find cooking to be a relaxing affair. And there is little that binds people together like breaking bread."

Will smiles. Then, he sets his knife and fork down, taking his glass in hand and swallowing another mouthful of wine. "I heard that there was another murder recently," he says, his eyes on Jack. "A patient of mine. Franklyn."

Jack nods, his eyes narrowed. "We found him earlier this week," he replies.

"Do you think it was the Ripper?"

"Hannibal doesn't seem to think so," he says.

Will huffs. "That's a shame."

"Is it?"

"Yes," Will says. "The more he kills, the more his victimology and practice betray him. And his cooling off period is frustratingly long. Frankly I'm amazed he's still in Maryland."

"What makes you so sure he is?"

Will smiles, his eyes heavy-lidded when he looks at Jack. He leans one elbow on the armrest of the chair, towards Hannibal. "Why would a King leave his castle, except if he was forced out?"

Jack hums, nodding once. "You make a fair point," he says, overly-careful. "Actually, that's something I wanted to speak to both of you about. Have you made any progress on the Ripper case?"

"Some, yes," Hannibal says. "We believe he is consuming the organs he takes."

Jack pauses, his eyes on his plate, then his wine, then darting between Will and Hannibal in short, sharp motions. Beside him, out of the corner of his eye, Hannibal sees Will's smile sharpen, widen to show his teeth.

Jack clears his throat and washes his mouthful down with more wine. "There was another murder," Jack says, slowly. "I suppose Hannibal has told you about it?"

Will's brow furrows, and he tilts his head to one side. "Oh?"

"Your ex-husband, Randall Tier, was found displayed in a museum, in the prehistoric predator exhibit."

"Randall?" Hannibal must give credit where it's due – Will's performance is very convincing. He sets his wine glass down, fingers trembling, and puts his hand at his throat. Jack's eyes narrow on the bruises. "I didn't…I didn't even know he was back in state." His eyes are wide, and Hannibal can see the shine of tears in his eyes – what a lovely display. Hannibal's chest feels warm, remembering how Randall had looked, eyes glassy and blank staring back at him in such a visceral declaration of Will's love.

Jack raises an eyebrow, and sits back. "Doctor Graham," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side – he's distancing himself, using Will's title instead of his first name. "I also have you on video abandoning Tobias Budge's vehicle at a chop shop in Annapolis."

Will's fingers curl.

"Budge. The string shop owner?" he murmurs.

Jack nods, and looks at Will's neck again. "That's a nasty-looking cut," he says mildly. Will swallows, taking his fingers away as though baring his throat. "Now, maybe Budge didn't like you poking your nose where it didn't belong. Maybe he came after you, and attacked you. I could buy self-defense." Will takes in a deep breath, and Hannibal isn't sure he's pretending as much anymore. "But then you tried to cover up the evidence. Hid the body, and the car."

Will blinks, brow furrowed. "That's…an interesting story, Agent Crawford," he says tightly.

"And one a jury would easily believe," Jack replies smoothly. "But then there's Randall, too. I don't know how likely they'd believe you just *happened* to be tied to two murders, Doctor – and two killers at that. Can you think of a reasonable explanation for all this?"

Will's eyes flash to Hannibal, a question in them. Hannibal smiles, and nods. Once. Slowly.

It's time.

Will sighs, his shoulders sagging. "I suppose that's it, then," he murmurs.

Jack raises his eyebrows. "You'll come quietly?"

"You're both capable men, and you have guns," Will says. "I know when I'm beat, Agent Crawford."

Jack nods, and wipes his mouth with his napkin. He stands, and Will follows suit. He holds his hands out in front of him and Jack takes a set of handcuffs from his pocket, clicking them into place tightly around Will's wrists.

"Will Graham," he says. "You are under arrest for the murder of Randall Tier and Tobias Budge. You have the right to remain silent…"

Hannibal tunes him out, his eyes on Will as Jack reads him his rights. Will isn't looking at him – his eyes are on Jack's hands, lower lip trapped between his teeth. Hannibal will admit, he's almost disappointed. He did not expect Will to go quietly – Will's behavior until now has been entirely instinctive, reactionary, and driven by a dire need to survive. Incarceration is better than suicide by cop, but it's still a death of sorts.

Perhaps he is waiting for Hannibal to act.

Hannibal stands, and Jack gathers Will's wrists in one hand. Their eyes meet and Jack nods to him. "Shall we?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, sighing through his nose. "A shame to waste a good meal," he murmurs.

Jack's face darkens. "It's evidence," he says coldly. "For all we know, that's human meat he's been feeding you, Agent Lecter."

"Oh, I'm positive of it," Hannibal replies with a smile. Jack frowns at him. "There's a certain richness to the other, other white meat. Different from pork or beef."

"What -?"

Will jerks back, abruptly, with a grunt of effort. He yanks his hands out of Jack's grip and turns, lunging for the cutting knife which still sits in the baking dish. Jack lets out a yell of alarm, reaching for his gun, but the quarters are too close for a firearm, his reaction too slow. Will whirls around, knife in both hands and, with a growl, plunges the knife deep into Jack's stomach.

Jack's eyes bulge and widen, his mouth falls open in a gasp. He's still struggling for his gun and Hannibal circles the table quickly, grabs his wrist and twists it so the gun drops. Jack looks at him, like he's in too much shock to realize what Hannibal has done. Will uses the shock to his advantage, and yanks the blade out. His teeth are bared, hands and forearms covered in blood, and he plunges the knife into Jack again, his neck this time, severing the artery with the kind of precision only a surgeon or butcher could accomplish.

Jack's breath comes in fast, hitching burbles as he bleeds out. He falls forward and Will catches him, grunting under his weight, and turns them so that Jack falls against the empty bookshelves behind him. Hannibal sets Jack's gun down on the table, watching dispassionately as Jack claws at the wound in his neck. It reminds Hannibal of Abigail Hobbs.

Will is breathing hard, his eyes bright and fingers curled tightly around the knife in his hand. Blood shines off the metal of the blade and his handcuffs, and when the light in Jack's eyes go out, so too does the tension run from his shoulders, dripping like melting ice. He breathes out and drops the knife, taking a step back until his back hits the chair on which Jack was sitting.

Hannibal meets his eyes, which are wild and greener in the low light. Will's mouth twitches at the corner, like he's trying not to snarl. "Would you have let him take me?" he asks.

"I wanted to see if you'd let yourself be taken," Hannibal replies mildly. He smiles. "I wasn't disappointed."

The sound Will makes is so heavy with relief, for a moment Hannibal fears for the strength in his body, sure that he might fall to his knees from the force of it. But he remains upright, and raises his shaking hands to his neck, fingertips brushing over his mouth. He licks his lips clean, absently.

"I think he knew," he whispers. "In that final moment. He saw you, as I do."

Hannibal smiles, and approaches Will, taking his hands and lacing their fingers together. He huffs a short laugh, and Will meets his eyes, questioning. "I was right," he says, and kisses Will's bloodied knuckles. "You burn."

Will lets out a shaky, breathless laugh. He wraps his hands in Hannibal's shirt and yanks him close, so their chests collide, and Hannibal's hands settle on the back of the chair where Will's hips are braced, and Will kisses him. His mouth tastes like blood and rich meat, wine thick on his tongue. Hannibal growls as Will clutches at him, no longer hesitant and passive. It's a change as sudden as it is welcome, and Hannibal delightedly admits that he likes Will much better when he's rabid with satisfaction.

"Darling," he whispers, when Will allows him air. "We must go."

Will nods, swallowing harshly, and Hannibal steps away and fishes the handcuff key from Jack's pocket. He also finds his cell phone, shuts it off and removes the SIM card from it, crushing it under his shoe.

Will holds out his hands for Hannibal to uncuff him, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side, considering.

Then, he smiles. "No," he says, and pockets the key. Will's eyes flash, but he's ultimately trusting when Hannibal touches him, tilts his chin up and kisses his slack mouth. He wraps his fingers around the middle of the cuffs, and tugs Will towards the door.

Will's cabin is a three-hour drive away, by the cliffs. It is a large building, with one wall made entirely of glass and jutting out in a sharp point towards the edge of the land. There is a patio,

lit only by fireflies, and inside the space is sparsely but cleanly furnished, the kind of downplayed opulence that Hannibal has come to expect from Will.

He carries their suitcases inside, unwilling to let Will's bloody hands touch anything despite the fact that, by the time they arrive there, it's long-dried, flaking and brown on his skin. He looks like an extra from a horror movie, coated in blood from chest to toe. His clothes will likely meet their end at the bottom of the cliffs after Hannibal bathes him.

They go inside and seal the perimeter. The only light is a fire in the hearth, coloring the air golden and soft like a lover's getaway retreat.

Hannibal has Will sit, still cuffed, and fetches a bowl of water and a cloth. Despite Will's dirty state, only his hands are really bloody, along with spotted marks on his neck and jaw. He'd kept his hands to himself, so the only troubling stains are on their clothes.

Hannibal sits on the coffee table in front of him, Will on the couch, and rests the bowl of water at his side. He leans in and Will mimics him, elbows on his knees, hands cupped and relaxed like a supplicant asking for Communion.

Hannibal smiles and takes out the handcuff key, undoing them and setting them to one side. Will's smile widens, showing his teeth. "Sure I won't run, now?" he asks, teasing.

Hannibal cups one of his hands, wets the cloth and starts to clean him of blood. Neck first, then his hands. The towel quickly turns pink, the water with it, as he gently and thoroughly cleanses Will's burning hands of the stain of their kill. "It was an indulgence," he murmurs. "There's something poetic about putting a man in restraints."

Will shivers, biting his lower lip. Jack tightened them offensively deep around Will's wrists – there are indents and small red patches where he pulled at them, testing the give. Hannibal knows there is none. "Have you ever been in chains?" he asks.

Hannibal shakes his head.

"I feel like I am," Will continues. "Chained. Not bound, though. I feel heavy."

"Weighted by your sins?"

Will shakes his head, sighing.

Hannibal pauses, and cups Will's face, forcing their eyes to meet. He watches Will's face for a long moment, tilts his head to one side. "Do you regret it?" he asks. Will looks almost wistful.

Will shakes his head again, and turns his cheek into Hannibal's palm, kisses the meat of his thumb. "No," he says. Hannibal can tell he isn't lying. He lets go of Will and returns to the task of cleaning his hands. He pushes Will's sleeves up to halfway up his forearms, so he doesn't miss a spot. "I think this is just how people feel when a large project is completed. I feel at a loss."

"When one thing is done, it opens time up to new things," Hannibal replies.

"And these new things," Will asks. "Is there room enough for both of us in them?"

Hannibal smiles. "You still worry that I might discard you," he says, lifting his eyes to meet Will's, briefly. Will bites his lower lip and looks away. "You worry my pardon will expire. That I might grow bored and find another pretty man with a killer instinct to warm my bed."

"Am I wrong?" Will asks, but Hannibal doesn't miss how his fingers curl and his cheeks darken at the mention of a bed. He shivers when Hannibal's fingers brush feather-light over his wrists.

"Worry, like forgiveness, is not something I can force," Hannibal replies. "Either it's there, or it isn't. Nothing I say will change your mind. No promise, no vow. You are mine until you are not, and in your mind that could happen tonight, or tomorrow, or ten years from now."

He finishes with the first hand, and moves on to the second.

"I know I won't bore you," Will says after a moment. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, but doesn't answer. "Your curiosity is still too sharp, too bright." He huffs, and smiles. "Do you know the story of Scheherazade?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies.

"I can entertain you with stories for ten thousand nights," Will says quietly. "And by the time the stories that predate you run dry, there will be opportunity for a thousand more." He sighs. "So, no, I don't worry about that. Rather, the opposite."

"You fear my curiosity?"

"Aren't you curious what I taste like?"

Hannibal smiles, heat abruptly curling in his chest like a snake, tail rattling. He finishes with Will's other hand and sets the cloth back in the bowl, and meets his eyes. He leans forward and takes Will's hands with both of his own.

"There is more than one way to consume a man," Hannibal purrs. Will's jaw clenches and his fingers tighten between Hannibal's. His exhale, when it comes, is shaky and soft. Hannibal slides forward until Will's knees part, giving him room. He lets go of one of Will's hands, takes him by the hair, and kisses his forehead. "Head first," he whispers against Will's dark curls, and Will shivers. "Heart first." His hand slides down Will's blood-stained chest, spreads out like he intends to rip Will's heart out with his bare hands.

Then, his palm flattens, slides lower. "Stomach first."

"Hannibal," Will breathes, his free hand sliding into place on Hannibal's thigh.

Hannibal smiles, and his hand slides lower on Will's stomach, turns and grazes the heat between his legs. Will whimpers, arching into the touch, and Hannibal nudges Will's head to one side, finds his mark under Will's ear and kisses the bruise there.

"I will devour you, Will," he promises, and Will lets out a desperate, high-pitched sound. His shoulders tense and his fingers curl between Hannibal's, dragging his touch to Will's thigh. Hannibal's other hand spreads out on Will's hip, hauling him closer, and Hannibal slides to his knees between Will's legs.

Will gasps, his hand flying from his thigh to Hannibal's hair, gentle as he cups Hannibal's skull and leans down, kissing him fiercely. He claws at Hannibal's shoulders like an animal, a man possessed, and Hannibal smiles into the kiss, pushing Will's knees farther apart to give himself room.

Will trembles under his touch, and lifts his hips when Hannibal's fingers deftly undo the button and zip of his blood-stained suit pants, sliding them down his hips and thighs along with his underwear to bare his cock. He's hard, the flesh a pretty, dark red and jutting from a patch of dark hair, and Hannibal smiles when Will's fingers tighten, and his kiss turns sharp with his teeth.

He growls, and shoves Will back, forcing him to lean against the back of the couch. Will lets go of his hair, his fingers instead fisting the couch cushions hard enough his knuckles turn white.

Hannibal leans in, finds the tender innards of Will's thigh. He parts his jaws and bites down and Will hisses, tensing up in pain, his mouth parted and wet, eyes bright despite his wide pupils. Still, he keeps his legs spread, doesn't deny Hannibal his hunger. His skin is tender and sweet in Hannibal's mouth, blood rushing up in a blooming bruise as Hannibal sucks.

"Hannibal," Will gasps, stomach sinking in. "Please."

"Shh, darling," Hannibal replies. Still, he wraps the fingers of one hand around Will's cock, tight, stroking slowly. "A meal this fine ought to be savored, and I have been denied once already tonight."

"I'll keep you well-fed," Will growls. One of his hands finds Hannibal's hair again, twisting gently. "I promise."

Hannibal smiles. "I know," he murmurs. He meets Will's eyes, watches the flex of his throat, the heave of his chest, the subtle way his teeth are bared when Hannibal's fingers tighten around the head of his cock. His smile widens, showing his own teeth in return.

"Please," Will whispers, plaintive and low. "Let me sate you."

Hannibal growls, the heat in his chest uncoiling suddenly at the sound of Will's voice, already wrecked like he's been screaming himself hoarse with desire. Maybe he has, in that perfect place where everything is in technicolor and they exist together as one.

He lowers his gaze and his head, kisses wide and warm on the side of Will's cock. Opens his mouth wider – threatens teeth. Will shivers when he does it, his hips subtly arching up. Hannibal rewards his trust, slides his fingers down, and lets Will's cock sink into his mouth.

Will groans when he does it, his head falling back against the couch, panting up to the ceiling. His hand remains gentle in Hannibal's hair, knowing better than to tug or pull, and Hannibal relaxes his jaw and sinks down with a rumble of his own, until Will's cockhead hits the back of his throat. The scent of Will is overwhelming, sweet with wine and desire.

He pulls back, dragging his tongue along the thick vein and curling around the head of Will's cock, humming at the taste of precum as it spreads along his tongue. It's sharper than he'd like – he'll need to make sure Will's diet accommodates him – but the way Will gasps and trembles more than makes up for the sour taste. He does it again, dipping his tongue into the slit of Will's cock, and his hand slides down between Will's legs. There isn't a lot of room, since Will's clothes prevent him from spreading out as much he can, but Hannibal manages to find the smooth, sensitive patch of skin behind his balls, and he pushes his knuckles against it, taking Will back into his mouth and sinking down.

"*Fuck*," Will growls, arching with the instinctive desire to fuck Hannibal's mouth. He settles quickly when Hannibal's free hand flattens on his stomach, knowing he must be passive. He must obey. "Oh, God -. Hannibal, *please*."

It's a marvelous thing, feeling a man unravel from so little. Will's free hand touches Hannibal's cheek, the heat in his fingers blistering enough that Hannibal feels his own cheeks color in the haze of warmth emanating from both of them.

He uncurls his fingers, dips lower and brushes over Will's hole. Will's thighs tighten, and he gasps, cock twitching in Hannibal's mouth.

Hannibal pulls off, runs his hand from Will's stomach to his cock, wraps his fingers tight around the warm flesh and strokes slowly. Will lifts his head, and Hannibal can see how much he wants it, how badly he wants Hannibal to penetrate him, spear him in place and take everything Will's body can offer.

Hannibal shoves himself to his feet and Will rushes up to meet him like a tidal wave, kisses Hannibal's tender mouth with all the desperation of a reunited lost love. "Not tonight, darling," he says, pressing the words to the corner of Will's mouth. He twists his wrist and pushes the tip of one finger, dry, inside of Will. Despite the lack of preparation or proper lubricant, Will's body parts for him eagerly.

"You can," Will stutters, shaking. "I want it."

"And as much as I want it, also, I will not claim you while you still have another man's mark on you," Hannibal growls in reply. Will swallows, eyes glassy and hazy with desire. He bares his neck, like he's showing Hannibal evidence of his sin – Randall's handprint and Tobias' string. Hannibal kisses the bruise that he imagines Randall's thumb made. "You are mine, and no one else's."

"Yes," Will says, ardently, desperately. His cock twitches in Hannibal's hand, obviously pleased at Hannibal's possessiveness. Will sits up straighter, runs his hands down Hannibal's chest and cups his cock through his slacks. Hannibal growls, eyes closing despite himself at the heat in Will's hands. "But there are things I wouldn't let Randall do."

Hannibal bites Will's neck in answer. "Tell me."

"He never restrained me," Will breathes. His heartbeat is flying under Hannibal's teeth.

Hannibal pulls back, eyebrows raised, and Will smiles Hannibal's favorite smile, showing his teeth. He's starting to sweat, it's darkening and curling his hair in beautiful lines against his neck.

Hannibal lets him go, pulls his hands away, and reaches for the cuffs. He opens them, and Will offers his hands, and Hannibal places the cuffs at his wrists, tightening them in a series of clicks. Will's pupils overtake his whole iris when he does it.

"Did your Ripper shadow ever touch you like this?" he asks. He pulls Will to his feet by the cuffs, turns him and wraps an arm around Will's chest, his other hand finding Will's cock and stroking tightly.

Will whimpers, shoulders curling forward, baring the nape of his neck. "Once," he replies.

"Tell me."

"He came to me in my dreams," Will whispers, breath hitching when Hannibal ruts his cock against Will's bared ass, jaw clenching at the pressure, a tease of the tightness Will's body so desperately wants to offer him. "His hands bruised me, and burned me. He had your eyes."

Hannibal growls, kissing Will's nape.

"He had your teeth."

He parts his jaws, sinks his teeth around the tendon at the back of Will's neck. Will's knees shake, break, and he falls to his knees on the couch, cuffed hands on the back of it. Hannibal covers him immediately, mounts him with a hand in Will's hair and his other still punishingly tight on Will's cock.

"Did you let him use you, Will?" Hannibal says, both surprised and wholly not surprised at how low his voice has gotten. Will's need is like a physical tell, curling his fingers and tightening his thighs. Hannibal wants, oh how he wants, to bare Will to him completely, claim every inch of his flesh and his heart. But he will not do it when Will still has his ex-husband's handprint on his neck. His pride won't allow it.

Will's body will bear his marks, and his alone, when Hannibal comes for him. And it will not be a dream.

Will nods, gasping, back arching to seek the weight and heat of Hannibal's chest. Hannibal covers him, tugs on his sweaty hair, feels Will's shoulders shake and tense and his lungs shiver around his heavy breaths.

Will yanks on his cuffs, knots his hands in his own hair to make room for Hannibal's mouth. "I let him," he says. "I let him because I loved him."

"Just him?" Hannibal whispers. Deadly-soft.

"No," Will whispers. "Not just him."

"Show me," Hannibal demands. He lets go of Will's cock, spits on his fingers, and returns his touch and Will howls, fingers clawing through his own hair, down his neck. There's red along the edges of his fingernails.

Hannibal puts his hand over Will's mouth, sinks his fingers across Will's tongue, feels Will's teeth. Not biting – he's too well-trained for that.

"Show me how much you love me."

Will whimpers around his fingers, the knife sliding home behind his ribs. He rolls his hips, fucking Hannibal's hand once, twice, and shudders, a low moan stuck in his throat as his orgasm cracks him apart at the foundation. Hannibal will rebuild him like an old building restored. A brand-new project.

Hannibal snarls, yanks Will back by the hips and shoves him down onto the couch, onto the wet spot. He crawls over Will's thighs and pushes his shirt up to bare his lower back, and unfastens and unzips his slacks, pulling his cock free.

"Stay still, darling," he commands, though he doubts Will has the capacity to move. He's trembling and fine and Hannibal flattens a hand over his cock, forcing himself to fuck the sweaty dip of Will's spine, mimicking the tightness of fucking *into* something. For a moment, his pride and his desire war for dominance in his head, and then Will makes the sweetest, most broken sound of rapture, his cuffed hands reaching below him as his hips arch up, inviting and warm, and his fingers find Hannibal's thigh and digs his nails in.

Hannibal goes still, growling against Will's neck, the heat in his chest dipping downward and coiling, *coiling*, until his orgasm rushes out of him, and he moves his hand, so he can stain Will's lower back with his seed. He bites Will when he does it, lifting him by the neck and Will goes, pliant and sweet in his arms, moving so he's braced on his elbows so he can submit to Hannibal's bite.

Hannibal flattens his hands on the armrest past Will's shoulders, he rolls his hips and fucks through the mess he made on Will's back, a low, pleased rumble in his chest as his sensitive cock chases the heat and wetness merely hinted at.

Will's bruises and cuts will fade. Soon. Then Hannibal can gorge himself to his heart's content.

He parts his teeth, kisses the red imprint they left behind, and leans up more, cupping Will's jaw and turning him so that Hannibal can kiss him. Will's mouth is slack, cheeks red, the blush spreading down his neck, and he moans when Hannibal kisses him, desperate to answer Hannibal's desire and sate his hunger.

After a moment, Hannibal releases him, and reaches for the handcuff key, unclasping them from around Will's wrists and setting them to one side. Will rolls onto his back, uncaring for the mess he's lying in, and reaches for Hannibal again, kisses and touches his chest like he could happily die here at Hannibal's altar.

Hannibal indulges, drinks in Will's panting breaths and quiet whines, before he must part for air. He nuzzles Will's forehead, kisses his temple, and sighs, utterly satisfied.

Will huffs, a soft laugh breaking the silence. "I have been squirreling funds away for some time," he says, and Hannibal blinks, pulling back to meet his eyes. "We can go anywhere you want."

Hannibal hums, considering. "I quite like the idea of returning to Italy," he replies mildly, petting through Will's hair. He doesn't move off of Will's thighs or make any effort to fix their clothes, and Will doesn't seem to mind in the slightest.

"Italy would be nice," Will says. "Greece, too. Spain. New Zealand."

Hannibal smiles. "I've never been to Athens," he whispers.

Will's eyes brighten, and he nods. "Athens," he replies. "We can start there. There's a five-a.m. flight out of Harrisburg International this morning."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Am I so predictable?" he asks, teasing and fond. "Or did you memorize the flight plans of every airport along the East Coast?"

Will laughs. "Maybe I just like surprising you."

"To happy surprises, then," Hannibal says, and leans down for another kiss. Will smiles into it, gentle, his eyes full of adoration.

He sits up, and Hannibal moves back as Will gets to his feet. His eyebrows rise as Will fixes his clothes, and meets his gaze.

"You said there was something poetic about a man in restraints," he murmurs, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side, and nods. "Perhaps you will indulge me."

"What do you mean?"

Will swallows, his eyes flashing to their suitcases, by the door. He goes to his, and Hannibal sits on the couch, fixing his clothes. When Will returns, his hands are cupped closed, and he sits down at Hannibal's side.

He opens his hands, revealing the little black bag in which he keeps his wedding rings. "I'll have new ones made," he says, head dipped down. "If you want."

Hannibal understands why. Technically, this was Randall's wedding ring. Strangely, he doesn't feel the same offense looking at it as he does the marks on Will's neck.

He takes the ring and slides it onto his finger without a word. Will's fingers curl, and the breath he lets out is equal parts relieved and joyous.

Hannibal smiles, and takes the second ring, cups Will's hand and slides it into place over the tan line. He kisses Will's knuckles. "You are full of surprises, aren't you?"

Will smiles at him, cups his face, and draws him into a kiss. The band on his finger is cold, but will warm quickly, especially with how brightly each of them burn.

"You have no idea," Will whispers into the kiss, low and promising.

Hannibal smiles. The rest of his life promises to be very interesting indeed.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it! Murder Husbands in Greece!

Thank you to everyone who encouraged and stuck with me during this weird journey I made based off of the random thought that I don't remember seeing any role reversal fic where Hannibal is still the Ripper - if there are others, I certainly take recs!

Come yell at me on Tumblr (same name) and I hope you enjoyed the ride. Have a great day!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> a little pwp epilogue. i know how many people wanted the, ah, consummation ;D hope you like it!

On the run as they are, they cannot of course make their marriage official, and yet as time passes, the golden ring on Hannibal's finger becomes second nature to him. Not restrictive, as he imagined the practice might be. He finds himself toying with it idly in quiet moments, twisting it around on his finger, testing the give of his knuckle as he pulls it on and off. It's a perfect fit, really, and Hannibal could easily imagine that it was always his.

That Will was always his.

He returns to their home, the air sitting heavy on the back of his neck and his shoulders with the last dregs of summer heat. He sheds his jacket and hangs it by the door, breathes in the scent of coffee and ink. Will has taken to spending his days writing, completing that novel as he always wanted to. He lets Hannibal read his chapters when he's finished, offering critique and praise in equal measure. Will is quite the storyteller, Hannibal must admit, though he might be biased, considering the subject matter.

Namely, the Chesapeake Ripper, and the man who loves him.

He loosens his tie from its tight knot and breathes in deeply, heading to Will's study, but finds it empty. Curious. He straightens, and instead goes to the living room, and his smile softens when he finds Will on the couch, a cup of coffee abandoned on the table in front of him, his eyes closed, cheeks flushed with the heat. He's wearing lounge pants and a thin t-shirt, as has become his habit since he abandoned his sweater vests and slacks from his psychiatrist mantle.

He comes to a halt behind the couch, admiring the slope of Will's lax shoulders, the exposed arch of his neck. The little cut from the knife behind his ear, healed over so that only someone who knows it was there would be able to see it. It matches the faint line of Tobias' string cut, a little edge of white on the border of his beard.

He leans over, puts a hand in Will's sweat-damp hair, and kisses his temple. Will stirs, releasing a soft, pleased noise. His eyes flutter open and he rubs at them, ridding them of the crusts of sleep, and rolls onto his back, mouth offered for a chaste kiss that Hannibal eagerly grants him.

One of Will's hands comes up, touches Hannibal's cheek. His fingertips burn, the fire of a killer still burning Hell-hot inside of him. He opens his eyes when Hannibal pulls away, and

smiles.

"You're home early," he murmurs, raspy with sleep.

Hannibal nods. His eyes rake down Will's vulnerable form, the rise of his broad chest and the cling of his pants around his thighs. He brushes Will's hair from his face, gentle, and Will sits up with a sigh, stretching his arms out in front of him and gasping when his shoulder pops.

"The last museum tour was canceled," Hannibal explains, shedding his tie fully and letting it drape across the back of the couch. Will's eyes flash to the action, glacier-bright, and he bites his lower lip. His cheeks darken, as they always do when Hannibal begins to shed clothes, no matter how many layers still remain.

He stands, circles the couch, and falls into Hannibal's arms. His mouth tastes like coffee and leftover sweet meat from a rude customer at the museum that Hannibal hunted last week.

Hannibal growls, grabbing Will's flanks tightly, and pulls him close. "Come with me," he says. Will's eyes are dark, pupils wide, overtaking his iris, and he nods, and lets Hannibal lead him by the neck to their bedroom.

Hannibal closes the door and Will comes to a halt at the foot of their bed. He stands posed, ready, like a show horse about to be evaluated. This has become a tradition for them, and the air thickens with anticipation as Will meets his eyes.

Hannibal smiles, and approaches him, admiring the tremble in Will's hands and the sharp intake of his breath. "Tell me another story," he says, leaning in to kiss Will's shoulder, and his hands slide gentle and coaxing on his hips, turning him around.

Will shivers, his breath catching, eyes closing as Hannibal kisses the back of his neck. He swallows, and his fingers curl. "One night," he begins, "I had a predator in my home. He slept down the hall from me, and though there were walls and doors between us, the darkness connected us. He -." Will gasps, eyelids flying open when Hannibal's hands encircle his stomach, tuck under his shirt and press warmly to tender flesh. "I felt the air move when he did. I heard his voice, distant."

Hannibal hums. He hasn't heard this story before. "Was he calling for you?" he whispers, tugging on Will's shirt until it meets his arms. Will lifts them, allowing Hannibal to bare his chest, shoulders, and back.

Will shakes his head, just a little, not wanting to dislodge Hannibal's teeth when they find his nape. "No," he says. "He sent another monster to me. He was testing me."

Hannibal pauses, blinking once.

Will continues; "This predator came to us. Wanted what we had. Wanted what *I* had." Hannibal raises his head, circles to Will's front, meets his lover's eyes as Will bares his teeth, fixes him with a gaze that burns like a freshly-fired gun. "He wanted my monster all to himself."

Hannibal smiles, gaze heavy-lidded. He tucks his fingers into Will's lounge pants, brushes his knuckles to the insides of Will's wrists to watch his fingers curl. The gold of his wedding ring glints like shells in snow. A trail leading to the bloodshed.

"Keep going," he demands, mouth dry at the look in Will's eyes. Will swallows, wets his lips, and clenches his jaw when Hannibal forces his lounge pants down, going to his knees in the same motion. Will's hands clench, jerk, like he wants to grab, but it's part of the game. He's not allowed until Hannibal says he can.

"So he came to me," Will breathes, and Hannibal lets his clothes pool around his ankles, wraps strong hands around Will's thighs to bring him forward a step, so he's free of them. The flush on Will's face has spread, down his neck, staining his chest, but it pales in comparison to the deep, red blush of his cock. Hannibal's smile widens, and he presses his mouth to Will's hip, finds the jut of bone with his teeth and bites at the skin there, turning it pink. "He – *ah*, he tried to kill me. I know he wanted to. But I was ready."

Hannibal doesn't know how much of this is embellishment, but he knows what Will is referring to – the night Hannibal sent Tobias after him. The night of Will's first kill. He still thrums hot, remembering the color on Will's hands, the shine of it in his hair.

He parts his jaws, sucks a larger swath of skin between them, digs his teeth in until Will's stomach clenches and his cock twitches against Hannibal's jaw. Will likes pain – Hannibal found this out about him very quickly.

His own spine feels warm, arousal building behind his eyes, turning his nails sharp and his teeth savage as he lays another mark to Will's thigh, at the top where his leg bends. It's been a month since they fled to Greece, and though Will has proven a capable lover with his mouth, with his hands, Hannibal kept his word.

He would not claim Will until there were no marks on him except the ones Hannibal himself planted.

He pulls back, drinking in the ragged punch of Will's breath, and stands, pleased beyond measure to see that, finally, that day has come.

Will meets his eyes, and they're glazed with desperation. He must see what Hannibal sees, as he leans into Hannibal's touch, magnetized from the hips, and Hannibal growls, kissing him fiercely when Will's mouth meets his. Hannibal's hands find Will's, catch the press of his wedding ring between his fingers, and he turns Will and coaxes him onto the bed. The sheets are a soft blue that match Will's eyes in sunlight, delicate and thin for the heat of their climate.

Hannibal wants to tear them to shreds.

He bares his teeth against Will's lips, prowls over him and Will's mouth parts, allowing Hannibal to taste him. His tongue curls behind Hannibal's teeth, desperate for his own taste, his thighs spreading to make room for Hannibal's body between them.

His hands, those fire-hot, capable hands, push at Hannibal's shirt, tug it free from his belt and suit pants. He's too impatient for the buttons and instead pulls it up Hannibal's back, exposing warm skin, and Hannibal huffs, but parts from him enough to allow Will to pull it free, tossing it off the bed to the floor.

Will kisses him again, draws Hannibal close to him so that Hannibal feels similarly magnetized, like every part of Will must be touching every part of him. It's a fierce, possessive need, demanding he claw at Will's skin, bite his neck, pierce him so intimately and so finally, marking Will as his forevermore.

Will's exhale is shaky, his breathing ragged when Hannibal pulls away from him and turns his attention to his belt and suit pants. He tugs the belt free and before he can toss it away, Will takes it, sitting upright when Hannibal gives him a curious look.

Will smiles, and kisses him, and it feels like distraction, but Hannibal allows it. He's curious to see what Will might do with it.

He sheds the rest of his clothes, growling when his cock slides along the heat of Will's, as eager as the rest of him. Will's answering growl is soft, more like a purr, and rumbles in his chest. He pushes at Hannibal's shoulders and forces him onto his back and Hannibal goes, huffing and baring his teeth when Will settles into place on his lap. Will's heat, the weight of him, is the most delicious kind of torture, his cock leaking eager-wet onto Hannibal's stomach.

Will's eyes are ravenous, all black, raking over Hannibal's exposed chest, his lips parted and red. "I've been waiting for this for so long," he says, worshipful. Hannibal reaches up, cups Will's thighs and hauls them both so he's leaning against the headboard and Will can sit on him more comfortably. It makes his cock rut against Will's ass and Will shivers.

He leans in, kisses Hannibal desperately, roughly, and then pulls away just enough that he can reach for the bottle of lubricant in their bedside table. He retrieves it, and lets the belt sit in his lap as he uncaps it and pours some onto his fingers.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and Will mimics him, smiling Hannibal's favorite smile – the one that shows his teeth, lopsided and devious.

"Use your imagination," he says, low, challenging. Then, he reaches behind himself and Hannibal feels his wet fingers brushing over the head of Hannibal's cock, before they curl and Will shivers, ducking his head forward, as he slides one inside himself.

Hannibal growls. The idea of not touching Will, not breaking him apart from the inside himself, is offensive. His hands spread out on Will's thighs, keeping him steady, and his eyes fall to the belt.

Then, Will's neck. Will tilts his head to one side, exposing the soft, pale arch of it. There's no more evidence of Randall's hand there, nothing but pure, unmarked skin for Hannibal to do with as he sees fit.

He looks to the belt again, and his hands tighten.

Oh.

He takes the belt and pulls it taut, and Will's mouth parts again, lips shining. His free hand plants on the wall behind Hannibal's head and he trembles, cock twitching every time he works his finger in as deep as he can get. He won't be able to get far, especially at this angle – no matter how stretched he is, there will be a part of him too deep, that will have to yield to only Hannibal.

This is by design. Hannibal is sure of it.

Hannibal breathes out, and slowly wraps the belt around Will's neck. He watches Will's face, to be sure he hasn't read the situation wrong – Will is, after all, beautiful and perfectly matched for him, but there are limits to what a man might do for those he loves.

But the way Will's cock jerks, leaks so heavily, red as rare meat, and his eyelids flutter and his entire face goes slack, Hannibal understands that he read the situation perfectly.

Hannibal guides the end of the belt through the buckle, threads the metal piece through one of the holes so that it sits as a makeshift collar around Will's throat, and doubles the loop back through the buckle so that, if he should pull, it will restrain and be felt, but not cinch so tight that Will is in danger or permanently damaged. There is just enough give that Hannibal can wrap his fingers between the soft leather and Will's sweaty skin, and he does so, tugging on Will's neck so the belt edges bite into his skin and turn it white.

"*Yes*," Will breathes, shoulders bunched up, hips jerking forward like he's close already. He might be. The red-wine sweetness of his arousal burns Hannibal's nose, and Hannibal growls, hauls Will close and bites down below the belt, sinks his teeth around the collarbone where he knows it'll hurt more.

The sound Will lets out is high, punched-out, raw as a fresh kill. He rubs his cheek against Hannibal's temple and his hand falls from the wall to Hannibal's head, holding him to Will's flesh, encouraging him to suckle and lay marks to his heart's content.

Hannibal does, grabbing the end of the belt and pulling it so it hangs down Will's back, and yanks on it so Will must arch, his body a perfect curve, and Hannibal's other hand wraps around his cock, stroking tightly as Will moans and writhes in his arms.

"Hannibal," he whines, his voice tight with strain. It's rough from abuse already, wrecked from the base of his neck, and Hannibal snarls, gripping him tightly as Will ruts against his stomach. His breathing is no longer even, shaken to the core and he's a mess of sweat, of desire, the fire in him searing them both. "I –. I can't. *Please*."

"You can," Hannibal growls in reply. He lets go of the belt, wraps his hand in Will's hair and yanks him down for a kiss as Will whimpers, a tremor running down him that could shake the foundations of their home. He pulls his fingers out, joins Hannibal in touching his own cock and bears down, curling up tightly, breaking the kiss to shout his pleasure against Hannibal's neck. He trembles, spilling hot and wet over their joined hands, over Hannibal's chest. He clings to Hannibal, face a mask of pleasure so fierce it looks like pain, and bites down on Hannibal's shoulder as he rides out his orgasm.

Hannibal's heart stutters, his blood surging, and he hauls Will onto his back on the bed, rolls him to his stomach before Will has even stopped twitching. He presses himself to Will's thighs, ruts his cock against the smear of lube and sweat on the small of his back, and bites at Will's shoulder harsh enough to threaten breaking skin.

He digs his nails into Will's hips, forces him to lift up so Hannibal can rut against him in earnest. He wants to sink into Will right away, and he knows Will would let him, but there's something so delightfully animal in how Will gets when he's desperate, and Hannibal wants to feel him orgasm again, feel him tighten and bear down around his cock, feel how every piece of him will ache to have Hannibal finish in him.

He rakes his nails up Will's flanks, growling when Will shivers, and wraps a hand around the belt again, pulling Will to his elbows. His other hand curls around Will's cock between his legs, strokes the sensitive flesh tightly, and Will whimpers, his shoulders tightening and lifting into the press of Hannibal's mouth.

"Please," he whines. "*God*, please -."

"Don't worry, darling," Hannibal says, his voice gentle for how much his teeth itch to bury themselves in Will again. He lets go of Will's cock, cups his balls, tugs gently. Will hisses, flinching, and Hannibal lets him go and drags his fingers between Will's thighs, upwards, finds his stretched hole. He sinks two inside immediately and Will tightens around him with a heavy gasp. "You've been so patient, and so eager for me. I know you've been thinking about this."

"Yes," Will whispers. "Every night."

It became a tradition. Hannibal would come home from work, feed them if they were hungry, and undress Will in the way he had. He would catalogue the bruises and cuts on Will, watch as they faded, turned purple, then yellow, then green. Watched them heal, each time sighing and shaking his head when Will still bore evidence of them.

He has kept Will satisfied, as much as his own inclinations would allow, but this is different. This is completion, a claim that will seal them together until the end of the time. The end of a pardon, where the guest becomes a member of the court.

He would see Will richly rewarded for his patience.

He curls his fingers down, finds his flushed, swollen prostate with a well-honed touch. Will whimpers, oversensitive but unprotesting, and Hannibal tugs on the belt around his neck again, punctuating each touch of his fingers with a tease of air. Will's shoulders and back are shining with sweat, he's slick to the core, and Hannibal drags his teeth down Will's spine, licks the taste of his need, salted and sweet all at once.

"Hannibal, *please*," Will gasps, every muscle in him lifting up to Hannibal's hands, his mouth, his weight. He offers himself up openly, bares his neck and his heart to Hannibal's possessive touch, and his skin blooms with each bite, each rake of nails, each sucking kiss Hannibal lays upon him. Will's flesh will be marked, stained inside and out, and Hannibal

wants to wait but the sound of his mate, his sweet and beautiful all-seer, calling for him so ardently? Hannibal would challenge any man to resist such a thing.

He pulls his fingers out, spreads his hands wide on Will's sides and rolls him onto his back. Will's eyes are barely open, glazed and shining with desperation like his own orgasm means nothing when Hannibal isn't inside him. Will parts for him, thighs and arms and mouth, and Hannibal covers him, shoves his hands behind Will's knees, and angles their bodies so his cock catches on the slick, open breach to Will's body.

He pushes in, and Will arches with a strangled cry. His cock is still flushed, half-swollen and laying heavily on his stomach, and Hannibal sinks into him, forces himself deeper than their fingers went. Will winces, teeth lined up and bared as he relaxes through it, accepting Hannibal inside him. His hands claw at Hannibal's chest, his shoulders, up into his hair, and he curls up and kisses Hannibal, ass clenching up tightly like a lure to tug Hannibal in.

Hannibal snarls against his mouth, doesn't wait, pulls back and fucks in again hard enough to make the bed creak.

Will hasn't been the only one made to exercise patience.

Will gasps, whimpering as Hannibal fucks him, each time he bottoms out he's rewarded with another sweet sound, a siren call begging him to wash to shore, dash himself against the cliffside of Will's body, wreck his own on the shores of Will's love. He presses their foreheads together, not enough air between them to breathe right, and puts the backs of Will's knees to his shoulders, wraps his arms under Will's, and fucks in again.

"Hannibal," Will breathes, his eyes wide open now, pierced through the heart. Hannibal kisses him, slides his hands down to cup Will's ass and lift him into his thrusts. It feels like hunger, the deepest kind, urging him to give chase and hunt and *kill*. He bites Will's jaw, licks down his neck until he finds the belt, parts his teeth and bites down around it harsh enough he knows skin is trapped there, too.

Will moans, shuddering around him, so sinfully tight and burning hot. His hands – a killer's hand, heated, strong – burn Hannibal's shoulders, nails digging into his spine, and he cries out when Hannibal's cockhead finds his prostate again, tensing up and clenching down so tightly he almost forces Hannibal out.

Hannibal snarls, animal, and rears back. He tugs on the belt, unwraps it from Will's neck and barely takes time to admire the purpling edges of bruises there before his own hand takes its place. He hauls Will up by the neck, Will's legs settling around his waist instead. His nails dig into either side of Will's tender throat and Will trembles, going tense, his heartbeat stutters under Hannibal's hand and he goes still.

Pressed as close as they are, Hannibal feels Will's cock twitch, spurting out another slick mess of his seed. His ass tightens, clenches in syncopated rhythm to Hannibal's thrusts, and it feels like a fight, like a kill, the first resistance of flesh against a knife, the drag of bone against a saw.

Hannibal fucks in one more time, overwhelmed by how good it feels to finally claim this beautiful, devastating creature in his bed. He breaks the kiss, shoves his forehead to Will's collarbone, and shudders, forcing his hips tight to Will's body so that he can empty himself inside of his lover, fill him to bursting. His seed is slick around his cock, he keeps moving, forcing out every piece of himself that he can to sate Will's ravenous appetite.

Will is trembling when Hannibal blinks, returning to himself, the red haze of arousal and release clearing from his mind. They're both disgusting with sweat, with release, and Hannibal can taste Will's blood behind his teeth and finds that he has bitten down, laid another mark to Will's tender neck. He licks over the wound and Will whimpers, baring his throat, his hands gentle on Hannibal's shoulders.

He pulls out, hissing at the sharp aftershock of pleasure, and Will collapses in place, running a hand through his hair to push it out of his face. He's grinning, off-kilter and showing teeth, wide enough to dimple his cheeks, and Hannibal breathes out, rolling his shoulders to rid them of lingering strain.

Will sits up, reaching for him, and pulls Hannibal to him, rolling them so he is once again astride Hannibal's lap. The mess Hannibal left in him is leaking out already, staining their thighs, and Will kisses him with such gentleness, such gratitude, that it feels like a blessing.

He pulls back, eyes closed, and rests their foreheads together, heaving a steadying breath. He's still shaking, like he's sprinted a marathon, and Hannibal slides his hands up Will's sweaty flanks, curls around his heaving ribs.

"You've given me everything," Will whispers, touching his own neck. His eyes open and he sits back, allowing Hannibal a view of what he's done. Will sits like a canvas, displayed only for Hannibal's greedy eyes, a mess of red and purple and deep, rosy pinks.

"All that I can," Hannibal replies, hoarsely. He slides a hand into Will's hair, notes the soft flutter of his lashes and the way his mouth goes slack, smiling. "All that I am."

"Thank you," Will says. He touches his bruised lips, then Hannibal's, and opens his eyes so their gazes can lock. Will's eyes are still dark, but the blue is returning to their edges, brightening like summer sky. "Though I fear you might make me ravenous."

Hannibal smiles. "You promised to keep me well-fed," he says, and Will nods. "So, too, do I swear to sate your every need. You are mine, and I will take care of you."

Will's face softens, and his eyes drop. He tilts his head, takes Hannibal's hand and brings it to his mouth. He kisses the ring on Hannibal's finger, and his lips, like his hands, burn.

"I'll hold you to that."

Hannibal's smile widens, and he pulls Will to him again.

"I expect no less."

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